

CERSEI

Three wretched fools with a leather sack, the queen thought as they sank to their knees before her. The look of them did not encourage her. *I suppose there is always a chance.*

“Your Grace,” said Qyburn quietly, “the small council...”

“...will await my pleasure. It may be that we can bring them word of a traitor’s death.” Off across the city, the bells of Baelor’s Sept sang their song of mourning. *No bells will ring for you, Tyrion*, Cersei thought. *I shall dip your head in tar and give your twisted body to the dogs.* “Off your knees,” she told the would-be lords. “Show me what you’ve brought me.”

They rose; three ugly men, and ragged. One had a boil on his neck, and none had washed in half a year. The prospect of raising such to lordship amused her. *I could seat them next to Margaery at feasts.* When the chief fool undid the drawstring on the sack and plunged his hand inside, the smell of decay filled her audience chamber like some rank rose. The head he pulled out was grey-green and crawling with maggots. *It smells like Father.* Dorcas gasped, and Jocelyn covered her mouth and retched.

The queen considered her prize, unflinching. “You’ve killed the wrong dwarf,” she said at last, grudging every word.

“We never did,” one of the fools dared to say. “This is got to be him, ser. A dwarf, see. He’s rotted some, is all.”

“He has also grown a new nose,” Cersei observed. “A rather bulbous one, I’d say. Tyrion’s nose was hacked off in a battle.”

The three fools exchanged a look. “No one told us,” said the one with head in hand. “This one come walking along as bold as you please, some ugly dwarf, so we thought...”

“He *said* he were a sparrow,” the one with the boil added, “and *you* said he was lying.” That was directed at the third man.

The queen was angry to think that she had kept her small council waiting for this mummer’s farce. “You have wasted my time and slain an

innocent man. I should have your own heads off.” But if she did, the next man might hesitate and let the Imp slip the net. She would pile dead dwarfs ten feet high before she let that happen. “Remove yourselves from my sight.”

“Aye, Your Grace,” said the boil. “We beg your pardons.”

“Do you want the head?” asked the man who held it.

“Give it to Ser Meryn. No, *in* the sack, you lackwit. Yes. Ser Osmund, see them out.”

Trant removed the head and Kettleblack the headsman, leaving only Lady Jocelyn’s breakfast as evidence of their visit. “Clean that up at once,” the queen commanded her. This was the third head that had been delivered to her. *At least this one was a dwarf.* The last had simply been an ugly child.

“Someone will find the dwarf, never fear,” Ser Osmund assured her. “And when they do, we’ll kill him good.”

Will you? Last night Cersei had dreamed of the old woman, with her pebbly jowls and croaking voice. Maggy the Frog, they had called her in Lannisport. *If Father had known what she said to me, he would have had her tongue out.* Cersei had never told anyone, though, not even Jaime. *Melara said that if we never spoke about her prophecies, we would forget them. She said that a forgotten prophecy couldn’t come true.*

“I have informers sniffing after the Imp everywhere, Your Grace,” said Qyburn. He had garbed himself in something very like maester’s robes, but white instead of grey, immaculate as the cloaks of the Kingsguard. Whorls of gold decorated his hem, sleeves, and stiff high collar, and a golden sash was tied about his waist. “Oldtown, Gulltown, Dorne, even the Free Cities. Wheresoever he might run, my whisperers will find him.”

“You assume he left King’s Landing. He could be hiding in Baelor’s Sept for all we know, swinging on the bell ropes to make that awful din.” Cersei made a sour face and let Dorcas help her to her feet. “Come, my lord. My council awaits.” She took Qyburn by the arm as they made their way down the stairs. “Have you attended to that little task I set you?”

“I have, Your Grace. I am sorry that it took so long. Such a large head. It took the beetles many hours to clean the flesh. By way of pardon, I have lined a box of ebony and silver with felt, to make a fitting presentation for the skull.”

“A cloth sack would serve as well. Prince Doran wants his head. He won’t give a fig what sort of box it comes in.”

The pealing of the bells was louder in the yard. *He was only a High Septon. How long must we endure this?* The ringing was more melodious than the Mountain’s screams had been, but...

Qyburn seemed to sense what she was thinking. “The bells will stop at sunset, Your Grace.”

“That will be a great relief. How can you know?”

“Knowing is the nature of my service.”

Varys had all of us believing he was irreplaceable. What fools we were. Once the queen let it become known that Qyburn had taken the eunuch’s place, the usual vermin had wasted no time in making themselves known to him, to trade their whispers for a few coins. *It was the silver all along, not the Spider. Qyburn will serve us just as well.* She was looking forward to the look on Pycelle’s face when Qyburn took his seat.

A knight of the Kingsguard was always posted outside the doors of the council chambers when the small council was in session. Today it was Ser Boros Blount. “Ser Boros,” the queen said pleasantly, “you look quite grey this morning. Something you ate, perchance?” Jaime had made him the king’s food taster. *A tasty task, but shameful for a knight.* Blount hated it. His sagging jowls quivered as he held the door for them.

The councillors quieted as she entered. Lord Gyles coughed by way of greeting, loud enough to wake Pycelle. The others rose, mouthing pleasantries. Cersei allowed herself the faintest of smiles. “My lords, I know you will forgive my lateness.”

“We are here to serve Your Grace,” said Ser Harys Swyft. “It is our pleasure to anticipate your coming.”

“You all know Lord Qyburn, I am sure.”

Grand Maester Pycelle did not disappoint her. “*Lord Qyburn?*” he managed, purpling. “Your Grace, this... a maester swears sacred vows, to hold no lands or lordships...”

“Your Citadel took away his chain,” Cersei reminded him. “If he is not a maester, he cannot be held to a maester’s vows. We called the eunuch *lord* as well, you may recall.”

Pycelle sputtered. “This man is... he is unfit...”

“Do not presume to speak to me of *fitness*. Not after the stinking mockery you made of my lord father’s corpse.”

“Your Grace cannot think...” He raised a spotted hand, as if to ward off a blow. “The silent sisters removed Lord Tywin’s bowels and organs, drained his blood... every care was taken... his body was stuffed with salts and fragrant herbs...”

“Oh, spare me the disgusting details. I smelled the results of your *care*. Lord Qyburn’s healing arts saved my brother’s life, and I do not doubt that he will serve the king more ably than that simpering eunuch. My lord, you know your fellow councillors?”

“I would be a poor informer if I did not, Your Grace.” Qyburn seated himself between Orton Merryweather and Gyles Rosby.

My councillors. Cersei had uprooted every rose, and all those beholden to her uncle and her brothers. In their places were men whose loyalty would be to her. She had even given them new styles, borrowed from the Free Cities; the queen would have no “masters” at court beside herself. Orton Merryweather was her justiciar, Gyles Rosby her lord treasurer. Aurane Waters, the dashing young Bastard of Driftmark, would be her grand admiral.

And for her Hand, Ser Harys Swyft.

Soft, bald, and obsequious, Swyft had an absurd little white puff of beard where most men had a chin. The blue bantam rooster of his House was worked across the front of his plush yellow doublet in beads of lapis. Over that he wore a mantle of blue velvet decorated with a hundred golden hands. Ser Harys had been thrilled by his appointment, too dim to realize

that he was more hostage than Hand. His daughter was her uncle's wife, and Kevan loved his chinless lady, flat-chested and chicken-legged as she was. So long as she had Ser Harys in hand, Kevan Lannister must needs think twice about opposing her. *To be sure, a good-father is not the ideal hostage, but better a flimsy shield than none.*

"Will the king be joining us?" asked Orton Merryweather.

"My son is playing with his little queen. For the moment, his idea of kingship is stamping papers with the royal seal. His Grace is still too young to comprehend affairs of state."

"And our valiant Lord Commander?"

"Ser Jaime is at his armorer's being fitted for a hand. I know we were all tired of that ugly stump. And I daresay he would find these proceedings as tiresome as Tommen." Aurane Waters chuckled at that. *Good, Cersei thought, the more they laugh, the less he is a threat. Let them laugh.* "Do we have wine?"

"We do, Your Grace." Orton Merryweather was not a comely man, with his big lumpish nose and shock of unruly reddish-orange hair, but he was never less than courteous. "We have Dornish red and Arbor gold, and a fine sweet hippocras from Highgarden."

"The gold, I think. I find Dornish wines as sour as the Dornish." As Merryweather filled her cup, Cersei said, "I suppose we had as well begin with them."

Grand Maester Pycelle's lips were still quivering, yet somehow he found his tongue. "As you command. Prince Doran has taken his brother's unruly bastards into custody, yet Sunspear still seethes. The prince writes that he cannot hope to calm the waters until he receives the justice that was promised him."

"To be sure." *A tiresome creature, this prince.* "His long wait is almost done. I am sending Balon Swann to Sunspear, to deliver him the head of Gregor Clegane." Ser Balon would have another task as well, but that part was best left unsaid.

“Ah.” Ser Harys Swyft fumbled at his funny little beard with thumb and forefinger. “He is dead then? Ser Gregor?”

“I would think so, my lord,” Aurane Waters said dryly. “I am told that removing the head from the body is often mortal.”

Cersei favored him with a smile; she liked a bit of wit, so long as she was not its target. “Ser Gregor perished of his wounds, just as Grand Maester Pycelle foretold.”

Pycelle *harrumphed* and eyed Qyburn sourly. “The spear was poisoned. No man could have saved him.”

“So you said. I recall it well.” The queen turned to her Hand. “What were you speaking of when I arrived, Ser Harys?”

“Sparrows, Your Grace. Septon Raynard says there may be as many as two thousand in the city, and more arriving every day. Their leaders preach of doom and demon worship...”

Cersei took a taste of wine. *Very nice*. “And long past time, wouldn’t you agree? What would you call this red god that Stannis worships, if not a demon? The Faith should oppose such evil.” Qyburn had reminded her of that, the clever man. “Our late High Septon let too much pass, I fear. Age had dimmed his sight and sapped his strength.”

“He was an old done man, Your Grace.” Qyburn smiled at Pycelle. “His passing should not have surprised us. No man can ask for more than to die peacefully in his sleep, full of years.”

“No,” said Cersei, “but we must hope that his successor is more vigorous. My friends upon the other hill tell me that it will most like be Torbert or Raynard.”

Grand Maester Pycelle cleared his throat. “I have friends among the Most Devout as well, and they speak of Septon Ollidor.”

“Do not discount this man Luceon,” Qyburn said. “Last night he feted thirty of the Most Devout on suckling pig and Arbor gold, and by day he hands out hardbread to the poor to prove his piety.”

Aurane Waters seemed as bored as Cersei by all this prattle about septons. Seen up close, his hair was more silvery than gold, and his eyes

were grey-green where Prince Rhaegar's had been purple. Even so, the resemblance... She wondered if Waters would shave his beard for her. Though he was ten years her junior, he wanted her; Cersei could see it in the way he looked at her. Men had been looking at her that way since her breasts began to bud. *Because I was so beautiful, they said, but Jaime was beautiful as well, and they never looked at him that way.* When she was small she would sometimes don her brother's clothing as a lark. She was always startled by how differently men treated her when they thought that she was Jaime. Even Lord Tywin himself...

Pycelle and Merryweather were still quibbling about who the new High Septon was like to be. "One will serve as well as another," the queen announced abruptly, "but whosoever dons the crystal crown must pronounce an anathema upon the Imp." This last High Septon had been conspicuously silent regarding Tyrion. "As for these pink sparrows, so long as they preach no treason they are the Faith's problem, not ours."

Lord Orton and Ser Harys murmured agreement. Gyles Rosby's attempt to do the same dissolved into a fit of coughing. Cersei turned away in distaste as he was hacking up a gob of bloody phlegm. "Maester, have you brought the letter from the Vale?"

"I have, Your Grace." Pycelle plucked it from his pile of papers and smoothed it out. "It is a declaration, rather than a letter. Signed at Runestone by Bronze Yohn Royce, Lady Waynwood, Lords Hunter, Redfort, and Belmore, and Symond Templeton, the Knight of Ninestars. All have affixed their seals. They write—"

A deal of rubbish. "My lords may read the letter if they wish. Royce and these others are massing men below the Eyrie. They mean to remove Littlefinger as Lord Protector of the Vale, forcibly if need be. The question is, ought we allow this?"

"Does Lord Baelish seek our help?" asked Harys Swyft.

"Not as yet. In truth, he seems quite unconcerned. His last letter mentions the rebels only briefly before beseeching me to ship him some old tapestries of Robert's."

Ser Harys fingered his chin beard. “And these lords of the declaration, do *they* appeal to the king to take a hand?”

“They do not.”

“Then... mayhaps we need do nothing.”

“A war in the Vale would be most tragic,” said Pycelle.

“War?” Orton Merryweather laughed. “Lord Baelish is a most amusing man, but one does not fight a war with witticisms. I doubt there will be bloodshed. And does it matter who is regent for little Lord Robert, so long as the Vale remits its taxes?”

No, Cersei decided. If truth be told, Littlefinger had been more use at court. *He had a gift for finding gold, and never coughed.* “Lord Orton has convinced me. Maester Pycelle, instruct these Lords Declarant that no harm must come to Petyr. Elsewise, the crown is content with whatever dispositions they might make for the governance of the Vale during Robert Arryn’s minority.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”

“Might we discuss the fleet?” asked Aurane Waters. “Fewer than a dozen of our ships survived the inferno on the Blackwater. We must needs restore our strength at sea.”

Merryweather nodded. “Strength at sea is most essential.”

“Could we make use of the ironmen?” asked Orton Merryweather. “The enemy of our enemy? What would the Seastone Chair want of us as the price of an alliance?”

“They want the north,” Grand Maester Pycelle said, “which our queen’s noble father promised to House Bolton.”

“How inconvenient,” said Merryweather. “Still, the north is large. The lands could be divided. It need not be a permanent arrangement. Bolton might consent, so long as we assure him that our strength will be his once Stannis is destroyed.”

“Balon Greyjoy is dead, I had heard,” said Ser Harys Swyft. “Do we know who rules the isles now? Did Lord Balon have a son?”

“Leo?” coughed Lord Gyles. “Theo?”

“Theon Greyjoy was raised at Winterfell, a ward of Eddard Stark,” Qyburn said. “He is not like to be a friend of ours.”

“I had heard he was slain,” said Merryweather.

“Was there only one son?” Ser Harys Swyft tugged upon his chin beard. “Brothers. There were brothers. Were there not?”

Varys would have known, Cersei thought with irritation. “I do not propose to climb in bed with that sorry pack of squids. Their turn will come, once we have dealt with Stannis. What we require is our own fleet.”

“I propose we build new dromonds,” said Aurane Waters. “Ten, to start with.”

“Where is the coin to come from?” asked Pycelle.

Lord Gyles took that as an invitation to begin coughing again. He brought up more pink spittle and dabbed it away with a square of red silk. “There is no...” he managed, before the coughing ate his words. “...no... we do not...”

Ser Harys proved swift enough at least to grasp the meaning between the coughs. “The crown incomes have never been greater,” he objected. “Ser Kevan told me so himself.”

Lord Gyles coughed. “...expenses... gold cloaks...”

Cersei had heard his objections before. “Our lord treasurer is trying to say that we have too many gold cloaks and too little gold.” Rosby’s coughing had begun to vex her. *Perhaps Garth the Gross would not have been so ill*. “Though large, the crown incomes are not large enough to keep abreast of Robert’s debts. Accordingly, I have decided to defer our repayment of the sums owed the Holy Faith and the Iron Bank of Braavos until war’s end.” The new High Septon would doubtless wring his holy hands, and the Braavosi would squeak and squawk at her, but what of it? “The monies saved will be used for the building of our new fleet.”

“Your Grace is prudent,” said Lord Merryweather. “This is a wise measure. And needed, until the war is done. I concur.”

“And I,” said Ser Harys.

“Your Grace,” Pycelle said in a quavering voice, “this will cause more trouble than you know, I fear. The Iron Bank...”

“...remains on Braavos, far across the sea. They shall have their gold, maester. A Lannister pays his debts.”

“The Braavosi have a saying too.” Pycelle’s jeweled chain clinked softly. “*The Iron Bank will have its due*, they say.”

“The Iron Bank will have its due when I say they will. Until such time, the Iron Bank will wait respectfully. Lord Waters, commence the building of your dromonds.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”

Ser Harys shuffled through some papers. “The next matter... we have had a letter from Lord Frey putting forth some claims...”

“How many lands and honors does that man want?” snapped the queen. “His mother must have had three teats.”

“My lords may not know,” said Qyburn, “but in the winesinks and pot shops of this city, there are those who suggest that the crown might have been somehow complicit in Lord Walder’s crime.”

The other councillors stared at him uncertainly. “Do you refer to the Red Wedding?” asked Aurane Waters. “Crime?” said Ser Harys. Pycelle cleared his throat noisily. Lord Gyles coughed.

“These sparrows are especially outspoken,” warned Qyburn. “The Red Wedding was an affront to all the laws of gods and men, they say, and those who had a hand in it are damned.”

Cersei was not slow to take his meaning. “Lord Walder must soon face the Father’s judgment. He is very old. Let the sparrows spit upon his memory. It has nought to do with us.”

“No,” said Ser Harys. “No,” said Lord Merryweather. “No one could think so,” said Pycelle. Lord Gyles coughed.

“A little spittle on Lord Walder’s tomb is not like to disturb the grave worms,” Qyburn agreed, “but it would also be useful if someone were to be *punished* for the Red Wedding. A few Frey heads would do much to mollify the north.”

“Lord Walder will never sacrifice his own,” said Pycelle.

“No,” mused Cersei, “but his heirs may be less squeamish. Lord Walder will soon do us the courtesy of dying, we can hope. What better way for the new Lord of the Crossing to rid himself of inconvenient half brothers, disagreeable cousins, and scheming sisters than by naming them the culprits?”

“Whilst we await Lord Walder’s death, there is another matter,” said Aurane Waters. “The Golden Company has broken its contract with Myr. Around the docks I’ve heard men say that Lord Stannis has hired them and is bringing them across the sea.”

“What would he pay them with?” asked Merryweather. “Snow? They are called the *Golden Company*. How much gold does Stannis have?”

“Little enough,” Cersei assured him. “Lord Qyburn has spoken to the crew of that Myrish galley in the bay. They claim the Golden Company is making for Volantis. If they mean to cross to Westeros, they are marching in the wrong direction.”

“Perhaps they grew weary of fighting on the losing side,” suggested Lord Merryweather.

“There is that as well,” agreed the queen. “Only a blind man could fail to see our war is all but won. Lord Tyrell has Storm’s End invested. Riverrun is besieged by the Freys and my cousin Daven, our new Warden of the West. Lord Redwyne’s ships have passed through the Straits of Tarth and are moving swiftly up the coast. Only a few fishing boats remain on Dragonstone to oppose Redwyne’s landing. The castle may hold for some time, but once we have the port we can cut the garrison off from the sea. Then only Stannis himself will remain to vex us.”

“If Lord Janos can be believed, he is trying to make common cause with the wildlings,” warned Grand Maester Pycelle.

“Savages in skins,” declared Lord Merryweather. “Lord Stannis must be desperate indeed, to seek such allies.”

“Desperate and foolish,” the queen agreed. “The northmen hate the wildlings. Roose Bolton should have no trouble winning them to our cause.

A few have already joined up with his bastard son to help him clear the wretched ironmen from Moat Cailin and clear the way for Lord Bolton to return. Umber, Ryswell... I forget the other names. Even White Harbor is on the point of joining us. Its lord has agreed to marry both his granddaughters to our friends of Frey and open his port to our ships.”

“I thought we had no ships,” Ser Harys said, confused.

“Wyman Manderly was a loyal bannerman to Eddard Stark,” said Grand Maester Pycelle. “Can such a man be trusted?”

No one can be trusted. “He’s a fat old man, and frightened. However, he is proving stubborn on one point. He insists that he will not bend the knee until his heir has been returned to him.”

“Do we have this heir?” asked Ser Harys.

“He will be at Harrenhal, if he is still alive. Gregor Clegane took him captive.” The Mountain had not always been gentle with his prisoners, even those worth a goodly ransom. “If he is dead, I suppose we will need to send Lord Manderly the heads of those who killed him, with our most sincere apologies.” If one head was enough to appease a prince of Dorne, a bag of them should be more than adequate for a fat northman wrapped in sealskins.

“Will not Lord Stannis seek to win the allegiance of White Harbor as well?” asked Grand Maester Pycelle.

“Oh, he has tried. Lord Manderly has sent his letters on to us and replied with evasions. Stannis demands White Harbor’s swords and silver, for which he offers... well, *nothing*.” One day she must light a candle to the Stranger for carrying Renly off and leaving Stannis. If it had been the other way around, her life would have been harder. “Just this morning there was another bird. Stannis has sent his onion smuggler to treat with White Harbor on his behalf. Manderly has clapped the wretch inside a cell. He asks us what he should do with him.”

“Send him here, that we might question him,” suggested Lord Merryweather. “The man might know much of value.”

“Let him die,” said Qyburn. “His death will be a lesson to the north, to show them what becomes of traitors.”

“I quite agree,” the queen said. “I have instructed Lord Manderly to have his head off forthwith. That should put an end to any chance of White Harbor supporting Stannis.”

“Stannis will need another Hand,” observed Aurane Waters with a chuckle. “The turnip knight, perhaps?”

“A turnip knight?” said Ser Harys Swyft, confused. “Who is this man? I have not heard of him.”

Waters did not reply, except to roll his eyes.

“What if Lord Manderly should refuse?” asked Merryweather.

“He dare not. The onion knight’s head is the coin he’ll need to buy his son’s life.” Cersei smiled. “The fat old fool may have been loyal to the Starks in his own way, but with the wolves of Winterfell extinguished—”

“Your Grace has forgotten the Lady Sansa,” said Pycelle.

The queen bristled. “I most certainly have *not* forgotten that little she-wolf.” She refused to say the girl’s name. “I ought to have shown her to the black cells as the daughter of a traitor, but instead I made her part of mine own household. She shared my hearth and hall, played with my own children. I fed her, dressed her, tried to make her a little less ignorant about the world, and how did she repay me for my kindness? She helped murder my son. When we find the Imp, we will find the Lady Sansa too. She is not dead... but before I am done with her, I promise you, she will be singing to the Stranger, begging for his kiss.”

An awkward silence followed. *Have they all swallowed their tongues?* Cersei thought, with irritation. It was enough to make her wonder why she bothered with a council.

“In any case,” the queen went on, “Lord Eddard’s *younger* daughter is with Lord Bolton, and will be wed to his son Ramsay as soon as Moat Cailin has fallen.” So long as the girl played her role well enough to cement their claim to Winterfell, neither of the Boltons would much care that she was actually some steward’s whelp tricked up by Littlefinger. “If the north must have a Stark, we’ll give them one.” She let Lord Merryweather fill her cup once again. “Another problem has arisen on the Wall, however. The

brothers of the Night's Watch have taken leave of their wits and chosen Ned Stark's bastard son to be their Lord Commander."

"Snow, the boy is called," Pycelle said unhelpfully.

"I glimpsed him once at Winterfell," the queen said, "though the Starks did their best to hide him. He looks very like his father." Her husband's by-blows had his look as well, though at least Robert had the grace to keep them out of sight. Once, after that sorry business with the cat, he had made some noises about bringing some baseborn daughter of his to court. "Do as you please," she'd told him, "but you may find that the city is not a healthy place for a growing girl." The bruise those words had won her had been hard to hide from Jaime, but they heard no more about the bastard girl.

Catelyn Tully was a mouse, or she would have smothered this Jon Snow in his cradle. Instead, she's left the filthy task to me. "Snow shares Lord Eddard's taste for treason too," she said. "The father would have handed the realm to Stannis. The son has given him lands and castles."

"The Night's Watch is sworn to take no part in the wars of the Seven Kingdoms," Pycelle reminded them. "For thousands of years the black brothers have upheld that tradition."

"Until now," said Cersei. "The bastard boy has written us to avow that the Night's Watch takes no side, but his actions give the lie to his words. He has given Stannis food and shelter, yet has the insolence to plead with us for arms and men."

"An outrage," declared Lord Merryweather. "We cannot allow the Night's Watch to join its strength to that of Lord Stannis."

"We must declare this Snow a traitor and a rebel," agreed Ser Harys Swyft. "The black brothers must remove him."

Grand Maester Pycelle nodded ponderously. "I propose that we inform Castle Black that no more men will be sent to them until such time as Snow is gone."

"Our new dromonds will need oarsmen," said Aurane Waters. "Let us instruct the lords to send their poachers and thieves to me henceforth, instead of to the Wall."

Qyburn leaned forward with a smile. “The Night’s Watch defends us all from snarks and grumkins. My lords, I say that we must *help* the brave black brothers.”

Cersei gave him a sharp look. “What are you saying?”

“This,” Qyburn said. “For years now, the Night’s Watch has begged for men. Lord Stannis has answered their plea. Can King Tommen do less? His Grace should send the Wall a hundred men. To take the black, ostensibly, but in truth...”

“...to remove Jon Snow from the command,” Cersei finished, delighted. I knew I was right to want him on my council. “That is just what we shall do.” She laughed. If this bastard boy is truly his father’s son, he will not suspect a thing. Perhaps he will even thank me, before the blade slides between his ribs. “It will need to be done carefully, to be sure. Leave the rest to me, my lords.” This was how an enemy should be dealt with: with a dagger, not a declaration. “We have done good work today, my lords. I thank you. Is there aught else?”

“One last thing, Your Grace,” said Aurane Waters, in an apologetic tone. “I hesitate to take up the council’s time with trifles, but there has been some queer talk heard along the docks of late. Sailors from the east. They speak of dragons...”

“...and manticores, no doubt, and bearded snarks?” Cersei chuckled. “Come back to me when you hear talk of *dwarfs*, my lord.” She stood, to signal that the meeting was at an end.

A blustery autumn wind was blowing when Cersei left the council chambers, and bells of Blessed Baelor still sang their song of mourning off across the city. In the yard twoscore knights were hammering each other with sword and shield, adding to the din. Ser Boros Blount escorted the queen back to her apartments, where she found Lady Merryweather chuckling with Jocelyn and Dorcas. “What is it you all find so amusing?”

“The Redwyne twins,” said Taena. “Both of them have fallen in love with Lady Margaery. They used to fight over which would be the next Lord of the Arbor. Now both of them want to join the Kingsguard, just to be near the little queen.”

“The Redwynes have always had more freckles than wits.” It was a useful thing to know, though. *If Horror or Slobber were to be found abed with Margaery...* Cersei wondered if the little queen liked freckles. “Dorcas, fetch me Ser Osney Kettleblack.”

Dorcas blushed. “As you command.”

When the girl was gone, Taena Merryweather gave the queen a quizzical look. “Why did she turn so red?”

“Love.” It was Cersei’s turn to laugh. “She fancies our Ser Osney.” He was the youngest Kettleblack, the clean-shaved one. Though he had the same black hair, hooked nose, and easy smile as his brother Osmund, one cheek bore three long scratches, courtesy of one of Tyrion’s whores. “She likes his scars, I think.”

Lady Merryweather’s dark eyes shone with mischief. “Just so. Scars make a man look dangerous, and danger is exciting.”

“You shock me, my lady,” the queen said, teasing. “If danger excites you so, why wed Lord Orton? We all love him, it is true, but still...” Petyr had once remarked that the horn of plenty that adorned House Merryweather’s arms suited Lord Orton admirably, since he had carrot-colored hair, a nose as bulbous as a beetroot, and pease porridge for wits.

Taena laughed. “My lord is more bountiful than dangerous, this is so. Yet... I hope Your Grace will not think the less of me, but I did not come a maid entire to Orton’s bed.”

You are all whores in the Free Cities, aren’t you? That was good to know; one day, she might be able to make use of it. “And pray, who was this lover who was so... full of danger?”

Taena’s olive skin turned even darker as she blushed. “Oh, I should not have spoken. Your Grace will keep my secret, yes?”

“Men have scars, women mysteries.” Cersei kissed her cheek. *I will have his name out of you soon enough.*

When Dorcas returned with Ser Osney Kettleblack, the queen dismissed her ladies. “Come sit with me by the window, Ser Osney. Will

you take a cup of wine?" She poured for them herself. "Your cloak is threadbare. I have a mind to put you in a new one."

"What, a white one? Who's died?"

"No one, as yet," the queen said. "Is that your wish, to join your brother Osmund in our Kingsguard?"

"I'd rather be the *queen's* guard, if it please Your Grace." When Osney grinned, the scars on his cheek turned bright red.

Cersei's fingers traced their path across his cheek. "You have a bold tongue, ser. You will make me forget myself again."

"Good." Ser Osney caught her hand and kissed her fingers roughly. "My sweet queen."

"You are a wicked man," the queen whispered, "and no true knight, I think." She let him touch her breasts through the silk of her gown. "Enough."

"It isn't. I want you."

"You've had me."

"Only once." He grabbed her left breast again and gave it a clumsy squeeze that reminded her of Robert.

"One good night for one good knight. You did me valiant service, and you had your reward." Cersei walked her fingers up his laces. She could feel him stiffening through his breeches. "Was that a new horse you were riding in the yard yestermorn?"

"The black stallion? Aye. A gift from my brother Osfryd. Midnight, I call him."

How wonderfully original. "A fine mount for a battle. For pleasure, though, there is nothing to compare to a gallop on a spirited young filly." She gave him a smile and a squeeze. "Tell me true. Do you think our little queen is pretty?"

Ser Osney drew back, wary. "I suppose. For a girl. I'd sooner have a woman."

“Why not both?” she whispered. “Pluck the little rose for me, and you will not find me to be ungrateful.”

“The little... Margaery, you mean?” Ser Osney’s ardor was wilting in his breeches. “She’s the king’s wife. Wasn’t there some Kingsguard who lost his head for bedding the king’s wife?”

“Ages ago.” She was his king’s mistress, not his wife, and his head was the only thing he did not lose. Aegon dismembered him piece by piece, and made the woman watch. Cersei did not want Osney dwelling on that ancient unpleasantness, however. “Tommen is not Aegon the Unworthy. Have no fear, he will do as I bid him. I mean for Margaery to lose her head, not you.”

That gave him pause. “Her maidenhead, you mean?”

“That too. Assuming she has still one.” She traced his scars again. “Unless you think Margaery would prove unresponsive to your... charms?”

Osney gave her a wounded look. “She likes me well enough. Them cousins of hers are always teasing with me about my nose. How big it is, and all. The last time Megga did that, Margaery told them to stop and said I had a lovely face.”

“There you are, then.”

“There I am,” the man agreed, in a doubtful tone, “but where am I going to be if she... if I... after we...?”

“...do the deed?” Cersei gave him a barbed smile. “Lying with a queen is treason. Tommen would have no choice but to send you to the Wall.”

“The Wall?” he said with dismay.

It was all she could do not to laugh. *No, best not. Men hate being laughed at.* “A black cloak would go well with your eyes, and that black hair of yours.”

“No one returns from the Wall.”

“You will. All you need to do is kill a boy.”

“What boy?”

“A bastard boy in league with Stannis. He’s young and green, and you’ll have a hundred men.”

Kettleblack was afraid, she could smell it on him, but he was too proud to own up to that fear. *Men are all alike.* “I’ve killed more boys than I can count,” he insisted. “Once this boy is dead, I’d get my pardon from the king?”

“That, and a lordship.” *Unless Snow’s brothers hang you first.* “A queen must have a consort. One who knows no fear.”

“Lord Kettleblack?” A slow smile spread across his face, and his scars flamed red. “Aye, I like the sound o’ that. A lordly lord...”

“...and fit to bed a queen.”

He frowned. “The Wall is cold.”

“And I am warm.” Cersei put her arms about his neck. “Bed a girl and kill a boy and I am yours. Do you have the courage?”

Osney thought a moment before he nodded. “I am your man.”

“You are, ser.” She kissed him, and let him have a little taste of tongue before she broke away. “Enough for now. The rest must wait. Will you dream of me tonight?”

“Aye.” His voice was hoarse.

“And when you’re abed with our Maid Margaery?” she asked him, teasing. “When you’re in her, will you dream of me then?”

“I will,” swore Osney Kettleblack.

“Good.”

After he was gone, Cersei summoned Jocelyn to brush her hair out whilst she slipped off her shoes and stretched like a cat. *I was made for this,* she told herself. It was the sheer elegance of it that pleased her most. Even Mace Tyrell would not dare defend his darling daughter if she was caught in the act with the likes of Osney Kettleblack, and neither Stannis Baratheon nor Jon Snow would have cause to wonder why Osney was being sent to the Wall. She would see to it that Ser Osmund was the one to discover his brother with the little queen; that way the loyalty of the other two

Kettleblacks need not be impugned. *If Father could only see me now, he would not be so quick to speak of marrying me off again. A pity he's so dead. Him and Robert, Jon Arryn, Ned Stark, Renly Baratheon, all dead. Only Tyrion remains, and not for long.*

That night the queen summoned Lady Merryweather to her bedchamber. "Will you take a cup of wine?" she asked her.

"A small one." The Myrish woman laughed. "A big one."

"On the morrow I want you to pay a call on my good-daughter," Cersei said as Dorcas was dressing her for bed.

"Lady Margaery is always happy to see me."

"I know." The queen did not fail to note the style that Taena used when referring to Tommen's little wife. "Tell her I've sent seven beeswax candles to the Baelor's Sept in memory of our dear High Septon."

Taena laughed. "If so, she will send seven-and-seventy candles of her own, so as not to be outmourned."

"I will be very cross if she does not," the queen said, smiling. "Tell her also that she has a secret admirer, a knight so smitten with her beauty that he cannot sleep at night."

"Might I ask Your Grace which knight?" Mischief sparkled in Taena's big dark eyes. "Could it be Ser Osney?"

"It could be," the queen said, "but do not offer up that name freely. Make her worm it out of you. Will you do that?"

"If it please you. That is all I wish, Your Grace."

Outside a cold wind was rising. They stayed up late into the morning, drinking Arbor gold and telling one another tales. Taena got quite drunk and Cersei pried the name of her secret lover from her. He was a Myrish sea captain, half a pirate, with black hair to the shoulders and a scar that ran across his face from chin to ear. "A hundred times I told him no, and he said yes," the other woman told her, "until finally I was saying yes as well. He was not the sort of man to be denied."

"I know the sort," the queen said with a wry smile.

“Has Your Grace ever known a man like that, I wonder?”

“Robert,” she lied, thinking of Jaime.

Yet when she closed her eyes, it was the other brother that she dreamt of, and the three wretched fools with whom she had begun her day. In the dream it was Tyrion’s head they brought her in their sack. She had it bronzed, and kept it in her chamber pot.