

## CERSEI

“Oh, I pray the Seven will not let it rain upon the king’s wedding,” Jocelyn Swyft said as she laced up the queen’s gown.

“No one wants rain,” said Cersei. For herself, she wanted sleet and ice, howling winds, thunder to shake the very stones of the Red Keep. She wanted a storm to match her rage. To Jocelyn she said, “Tighter. Cinch it *tighter*, you simpering little fool.”

It was the wedding that enraged her, though the slow-witted Swyft girl made a safer target. Tommen’s hold upon the Iron Throne was not secure enough for her to risk offending Highgarden. Not so long as Stannis Baratheon held Dragonstone and Storm’s End, so long as Riverrun continued in defiance, so long as ironmen prowled the seas like wolves. So Jocelyn must needs eat the meal Cersei would sooner have served to Margaery Tyrell and her hideous wrinkled grandmother.

To break her fast the queen sent to the kitchens for two boiled eggs, a loaf of bread, and a pot of honey. But when she cracked the first egg and found a bloody half-formed chick inside, her stomach roiled. “Take this away and bring me hot spiced wine,” she told Senelle. The chill in the air was settling in her bones, and she had a long nasty day ahead of her.

Nor did Jaime help her mood when he turned up all in white and still unshaven, to tell her how he meant to keep her son from being poisoned. “I will have men in the kitchens watching as each dish is prepared,” he said. “Ser Addam’s gold cloaks will escort the servants as they bring the food to table, to make certain no tampering takes place along the way. Ser Boros will be tasting every course before Tommen puts a bite into his mouth. And if all that should fail, Maester Ballabar will be seated in the back of the hall, with purges and antidotes for twenty common poisons on his person. Tommen will be safe, I promise you.”

“Safe.” The word tasted bitter on her tongue. Jaime did not understand. No one understood. Only Melara had been in the tent to hear the old hag’s

croaking threats, and Melara was long dead. “Tyrion will not kill the same way twice. He is too cunning for that. He could be under the floor even now, listening to every word we say and making plans to open Tommen’s throat.”

“Suppose he was,” said Jaime. “Whatever plans he makes, he will still be small and stunted. Tommen will be surrounded by the finest knights in Westeros. The Kingsguard will protect him.”

Cersei glanced at where the sleeve of her brother’s white silk tunic had been pinned up over his stump. “I remember how well they guarded Joffrey, these splendid knights of yours. I want you to remain with Tommen all night, is that understood?”

“I will have a guardsman outside his door.”

She seized his arm. “Not a guardsman. You. And *inside* his bedchamber.”

“In case Tyrion crawls out of the hearth? He won’t.”

“So you say. Will you tell me that you found all the hidden tunnels in these walls?” They both knew better. “I will *not* have Tommen alone with Margaery, not for so much as half a heartbeat.”

“They will not be alone. Her cousins will be with them.”

“As will you. I command it, in the king’s name.” Cersei had not wanted Tommen and his wife to share a bed at all, but the Tyrells had insisted. “Husband and wife should sleep together,” the Queen of Thorns had said, “even if they do no more than sleep. His Grace’s bed is big enough for two, surely.” Lady Alerie had echoed her good-mother. “Let the children warm each other in the night. It will bring them closer. Margaery oft shares her blankets with her cousins. They sing and play games and whisper secrets to each other when the candles are snuffed out.”

“How delightful,” Cersei had said. “Let them continue, by all means. In the Maidenvault.”

“I am sure Her Grace knows best,” Lady Olenna had said to Lady Alerie. “She is the boy’s own mother, after all, of *that* we are all sure. And surely we can agree about the wedding night? A man should not sleep apart

from his wife on the night of their wedding. It is ill luck for their marriage if they do.”

*Someday I will teach you the meaning of “ill luck,”* the queen had vowed. “Margaery may share Tommen’s bedchamber for that one night,” she had been forced to say. “No longer.”

“Your Grace is so gracious,” the Queen of Thorns had replied, and everyone had exchanged smiles.

Cersei’s fingers were digging into Jaime’s arm hard enough to leave bruises. “I need *eyes* inside that room,” she said.

“To see *what*?” he said. “There can be no danger of a consummation. Tommen is much too young.”

“And Ossifer Plumm was much too dead, but that did not stop him fathering a child, did it?”

Her brother looked lost. “Who was Ossifer Plumm? Was he Lord Philip’s father, or... who?”

*He is near as ignorant as Robert. All his wits were in his sword hand.* “Forget Plumm, just remember what I told you. Swear to me that you will stay by Tommen’s side until the sun comes up.”

“As you command,” he said, as if her fears were groundless. “Do you still mean to go ahead and burn the Tower of the Hand?”

“After the feast.” It was the only part of the day’s festivities that Cersei thought she might enjoy. “Our lord father was murdered in that tower. I cannot bear to look at it. If the gods are good, the fire may smoke a few rats from the rubble.”

Jaime rolled his eyes. “Tyrion, you mean.”

“Him, and Lord Varys, and this gaoler.”

“If any of them were hiding in the tower, we would have found them. I’ve had a small army going at it with picks and hammers. We’ve knocked through walls and ripped up floors and uncovered half a hundred secret passages.”

“And for all you know there may be half a hundred more.” Some of the secret crawlways had turned out to be so small that Jaime had needed pages and stableboys to explore them. A passage to the black cells had been found, and a stone well that seemed to have no bottom. They had found a chamber full of skulls and yellowed bones, and four sacks of tarnished silver coins from the reign of the first King Viserys. They had found a thousand rats as well... but neither Tyrion nor Varys had been amongst them, and Jaime had finally insisted on putting an end to the search. One boy had gotten stuck in a narrow passage and had to be pulled out by his feet, shrieking. Another fell down a shaft and broke his legs. And two guardsmen vanished exploring a side tunnel. Some of the other guards swore they could hear them calling faintly through the stone, but when Jaime’s men tore down the wall they found only earth and rubble on the far side. “The Imp is small and cunning. He may still be in the walls. If he is, the fire will smoke him out.”

“Even if Tyrion were still hiding in the castle, he won’t be in the Tower of the Hand. We’ve reduced it to a shell.”

“Would that we could do the same to the rest of this foul castle,” said Cersei. “After the war I mean to build a new palace beyond the river.” She had dreamed of it the night before last, a magnificent white castle surrounded by woods and gardens, long leagues from the stinks and noise of King’s Landing. “This city is a cesspit. For half a groat I would move the court to Lannisport and rule the realm from Casterly Rock.”

“That would be an even greater folly than burning the Tower of the Hand. So long as Tommen sits the Iron Throne, the realm sees him as the true king. Hide him under the Rock and he becomes just another claimant to the throne, no different than Stannis.”

“I am aware of that,” the queen said sharply. “I said that I *wanted* to move the court to Lannisport, not that I would. Were you always this slow, or did losing a hand make you stupid?”

Jaime ignored that. “If these flames spread beyond the tower, you may end up burning down the castle whether you mean to or not. Wildfire is treacherous.”

“Lord Hallyne has assured me that his pyromancers can control the fire.” The Guild of Alchemists had been brewing fresh wildfire for a fortnight. “Let all of King’s Landing see the flames. It will be a lesson to our enemies.”

“Now you sound like Aerys.”

Her nostrils flared. “Guard your tongue, ser.”

“I love you too, sweet sister.”

How could I ever have loved that wretched creature? she wondered after he had gone. He was your twin, your shadow, your other half, another voice whispered. Once, perhaps, she thought. No longer. He has become a stranger to me.

Compared to the magnificence of Joffrey’s nuptials, the wedding of King Tommen was a modest affair, and small. No one wanted another lavish ceremony, least of all the queen, and no one wanted to pay for one, least of all the Tyrells. So the young king took Margaery Tyrell to wife in the Red Keep’s royal sept, with fewer than a hundred guests looking on in place of the thousands who had seen his brother joined to the same woman.

The bride was fair and gay and beautiful, the groom still baby-faced and plump. He recited his vows in a high, childish voice, promising his love and devotion to Mace Tyrell’s twice-widowed daughter. Margaery wore the same gown she had worn to marry Joffrey, an airy confection of sheer ivory silk, Myrish lace, and seed pearls. Cersei herself was still in black, as a sign of mourning for her murdered firstborn. His widow might be pleased to laugh and drink and dance and put all memory of Joff aside, but his mother would not forget him so easily.

This is wrong, she thought. It is too soon. A year, two years, that would have been time enough. Highgarden should have been content with a betrothal. Cersei stared back to where Mace Tyrell stood between his wife and mother. You forced me into this travesty of a wedding, my lord, and I shall not soon forget it.

When it was time for the changing of the cloaks, the bride sank gracefully to her knees and Tommen covered her with the heavy cloth-of-

gold monstrosity that Robert had cloaked Cersei in on their own wedding day, with the crowned stag of Baratheon worked upon its back in beads of onyx. Cersei had wanted to use the fine red silk cloak Joffrey had used. “It was the cloak my lord father used when he wed my lady mother,” she explained to the Tyrells, but the Queen of Thorns had balked her in that as well. “That old thing?” the crone had said. “It looks a bit threadbare to me... and dare I say, unlucky? And wouldn’t a *stag* be more fitting for King Robert’s trueborn son? In my day a bride donned her *husband*’s colors, not his lady mother’s.”

Thanks to Stannis and his filthy letter, there were already too many rumors concerning Tommen’s parentage. Cersei dared not fan the fires by insisting that he drape his bride in Lannister crimson, so she yielded as gracefully as she could. But the sight of all that gold and onyx still filled her with resentment. *The more we give these Tyrells, the more they demand of us.*

When all the vows were spoken, the king and his new queen stepped outside the sept to accept congratulations. “Westeros has two queens now, and the young one is as beautiful as the old one,” boomed Lyle Crakehall, an oaf of a knight who oft reminded Cersei of her late and unlamented husband. She could have slapped him. Gyles Rosby made to kiss her hand, and only succeeded in coughing on her fingers. Lord Redwyne kissed her on one cheek and Mace Tyrell on both. Grand Maester Pycelle told Cersei that she had not lost a son, but rather gained a daughter. At least she was spared Lady Tanda’s tearful embraces. None of the Stokeworth women had appeared, and for that much the queen was grateful.

Amongst the last was Kevan Lannister. “I understand you mean to leave us for another wedding,” the queen said to him.

“Hardstone has cleared the broken men from Darry castle,” he replied. “Lancel’s bride awaits us there.”

“Will your lady wife be joining you for the nuptials?”

“The riverlands are still too dangerous. Vargo Hoat’s scum remain abroad, and Beric Dondarrion has been hanging Freys. Is it true that Sandor Clegane has joined him?”

*How does he know that?* “Some say. Reports are confused.” The bird had come last night, from a septy on an island hard by the mouth of the Trident. The nearby town of Saltpans had been savagely raided by a band of outlaws, and some of the survivors claimed a roaring brute in a hound’s head helm was amongst the raiders. Supposedly he’d killed a dozen men and raped a girl of twelve. “No doubt Lancel will be eager to hunt down Clegane and Lord Beric both, to restore the king’s peace to the riverlands.”

Ser Kevan stared into her eyes for a moment. “My son is not the man to deal with Sandor Clegane.”

We agree on that much, at least. “His father might be.”

Her uncle’s mouth grew hard. “If my service is not required at the Rock...”

*Your service was required here.* Cersei had named her cousin Damion Lannister her castellan for the Rock, and another cousin, Ser Daven Lannister, the Warden of the West. *Insolence has its price, Uncle.* “Bring us Sandor’s head, and I know His Grace will be most grateful. Joff may have liked the man, but Tommen was always afraid of him... with good reason, it would seem.”

“When a dog goes bad, the fault lies with his master,” Ser Kevan said. Then he turned and walked away.

Jaime escorted her to the Small Hall, where the feast was being readied. “I blame you for all this,” she whispered as they walked. “*Let them wed*, you said. Margaery should be mourning Joffrey, not marrying his brother. She should be as sick with grief as I am. I do not believe she is a maid. Renly had a cock, didn’t he? He was Robert’s brother, he *surely* had a cock. If that disgusting old crone thinks that I will allow my son to—”

“You will be rid of Lady Olenna soon enough,” Jaime broke in quietly. “She’s returning to Highgarden on the morrow.”

“So she says.” Cersei did not trust any Tyrell promise.

“She’s leaving,” he insisted. “Mace is taking half the Tyrell strength to Storm’s End, and the other half will be going back to the Reach with Ser Garlan to make good his claim on Brightwater. A few more days, and the

only roses left in King's Landing will be Margaery and her ladies and a few guardsmen."

"And Ser Loras. Or have you forgotten your *Sworn Brother*?"

"Ser Loras is a knight of the Kingsguard."

"Ser Loras is so Tyrell he pisses rosewater. He should never have been given a white cloak."

"He would not have been my choice, I'll grant you. No one troubled to consult me. Loras will do well enough, I think. Once a man puts on that cloak, it changes him."

"It certainly changed *you*, and not for the better."

"I love you too, sweet sister." He held the door for her, and walked her to the high table and her seat beside the king. Margaery was on the other side of Tommen, in the place of honor. When she entered, arm in arm with the little king, she made a point of stopping to kiss Cersei on the cheeks and throw her arms around her. "Your Grace," the girl said, bold as polished brass, "I feel as though I have a second mother now. I pray that we shall be very close, united by our love for your sweet son."

"I loved both my sons."

"Joffrey is in my prayers as well," said Margaery. "I loved him dearly, though I never had the chance to know him."

Liar, the queen thought. If you had loved him even for an instant, you would not have been in such unseemly haste to wed his brother. His crown was all you ever wanted. For half a groat she would have slapped the blushing bride right there upon the dais, in view of half the court.

Like the service, the wedding feast was modest. Lady Alerie had made all the arrangements; Cersei had not had the stomach to face that daunting task again, after the way Joffrey's wedding had ended. Only seven courses were served. Butterbumps and Moon Boy entertained the guests between dishes, and musicians played as they ate. They listened to pipers and fiddlers, a lute and a flute, a high harp. The only singer was some favorite of Lady Margaery's, a dashing young cock-a-whoop clad all in shades of azure who called himself the Blue Bard. He sang a few love songs and



retired. “What a disappointment,” Lady Olenna complained loudly. “I was hoping for ‘The Rains of Castamere.’”

Whenever Cersei looked at the old crone, the face of Maggy the Frog seemed to float before her eyes, wrinkled and terrible and wise. *All old women look alike*, she tried to tell herself, *that’s all it is*. In truth, the bent-back sorceress had looked nothing like the Queen of Thorns, yet somehow the sight of Lady Olenna’s nasty little smile was enough to put her back in Maggy’s tent again. She could still remember the smell of it, redolent with queer eastern spices, and the softness of Maggy’s gums as she sucked the blood from Cersei’s finger. *Queen you shall be*, the old woman had promised, with her lips still wet and red and glistening, *until there comes another, younger and more beautiful, to cast you down and take all that you hold dear*.

Cersei glanced past Tommen, to where Margaery sat laughing with her father. She is pretty enough, she had to admit, but most of that is youth. Even peasant girls are pretty at a certain age, when they are still fresh and innocent and unspoiled, and most of them have the same brown hair and brown eyes as she does. Only a fool would ever claim she was more beautiful than I. The world was full of fools, however. So was her son’s court.

Her mood was not improved when Mace Tyrell arose to lead the toasts. He raised a golden goblet high, smiling at his pretty little daughter, and in a booming voice said, “To the king and queen!” The other sheep all *baaaaaaed* along with him. “*The king and queen!*” they cried, smashing their cups together. “*The king and queen!*” She had no choice but to drink along with them, all the time wishing that the guests had but a single face, so she could throw her wine into their eyes and remind them that *she* was the true queen. The only one of Tyrell’s lickspittles who seemed to remember her at all was Paxter Redwyne, who rose to make his own toast, swaying slightly. “*To both our queens!*” he chirruped. “*To the young queen and the old!*”

Cersei drank several cups of wine and pushed her food around a golden plate. Jaime ate even less, and seldom deigned to occupy his seat upon the

dais. *He is as anxious as I am*, the queen realized as she watched him prowl the hall, twitching aside the tapestries with his good hand to assure himself that no one was hiding behind them. There were Lannister spearmen posted around the building, she knew. Ser Osmund Kettleblack guarded one door, Ser Meryn Trant the other. Balon Swann stood behind the king's chair, Loras Tyrell behind the queen's. No swords had been allowed inside the feast save for those the white knights bore.

*My son is safe*, Cersei told herself. *No harm can come to him, not here, not now*. Yet every time she looked at Tommen, she saw Joffrey clawing at his throat. And when the boy began to cough the queen's heart stopped beating for a moment. She knocked aside a serving girl in her haste to reach him.

"Only a little wine that went down the wrong way," Margaery Tyrell assured her, smiling. She took Tommen's hand in her own and kissed his fingers. "My little love needs to take smaller sips. See, you scared your lady mother half to death."

"I'm sorry, Mother," Tommen said, abashed.

It was more than Cersei could stand. *I cannot let them see me cry*, she thought, when she felt the tears welling in her eyes. She walked past Ser Meryn Trant and out into the back passage. Alone beneath a tallow candle, she allowed herself a shuddering sob, then another. *A woman may weep, but not a queen*.

"Your Grace?" said a voice behind her. "Do I intrude?"

It was a woman's voice, flavored with the accents of the east. For an instant she feared that Maggy the Frog was speaking to her from the grave. But it was only Merryweather's wife, the sloe-eyed beauty Lord Orton had wed during his exile and fetched home with him to Longtable. "The Small Hall is so stuffy," Cersei heard herself say. "The smoke was making my eyes water."

"And mine, Your Grace." Lady Merryweather was as tall as the queen, but dark instead of fair, raven-haired and olive-skinned and younger by a decade. She offered the queen a pale blue handkerchief of silk and lace. "I have a son as well. I know that I shall weep rivers on the day he weds."

Cersei wiped her cheeks, furious that she had let her tears be seen. “My thanks,” she said stiffly.

“Your Grace, I...” The Myrish woman lowered her voice. “There is something you must know. Your maid is bought and paid for. She tells Lady Margaery everything you do.”

“Senelle?” Sudden fury twisted in the queen’s belly. Was there no one she could trust? “You are certain of this?”

“Have her followed. Margaery never meets with her directly. Her cousins are her ravens, they bring her messages. Sometimes Elinor, sometimes Alla, sometimes Megga. All of them are as close to Margaery as sisters. They meet in the sept and pretend to pray. Put your own man in the gallery on the morrow, and he will see Senelle whispering to Megga beneath the altar of the Maiden.”

“If this is true, why tell me? You are one of Margaery’s companions. Why would you betray her?” Cersei had learned suspicion at her father’s knee; this could well be some trap, a lie meant to sow discord between the lion and the rose.

“Longtable may be sworn to Highgarden,” the woman replied, with a toss of her black hair, “but I am of Myr, and my loyalty is to my husband and my son. I want all that is best for them.”

“I see.” In the closeness of the passage, the queen could smell the other woman’s perfume, a musky scent that spoke of moss and earth and wildflowers. Under it, she smelled ambition. *She gave testimony at Tyrion’s trial, Cersei recalled suddenly. She saw the Imp put the poison in Joff’s cup and was not afraid to say so.* “I shall look into this,” she promised. “If what you say is true, you will be rewarded.” *And if you’ve lied to me, I’ll have your tongue, and your lord husband’s lands and gold as well.*

“Your Grace is kind. And beautiful.” Lady Merryweather smiled. Her teeth were white, her lips full and dark.

When the queen returned to the Small Hall, she found her brother pacing restlessly. “It was only a gulp of wine that went down the wrong way. Though it startled me as well.”

“My belly is such a knot that I cannot eat,” she growled at him. “The wine tastes of bile. This wedding was a mistake.”

“This wedding was necessary. The boy is safe.”

“Fool. No one who wears a crown is ever safe.” She looked about the hall. Mace Tyrell laughed amongst his knights. Lords Redwyne and Rowan were talking furtively. Ser Kevan sat brooding over his wine at the back of the hall, whilst Lancel whispered something to a septon. Senelle was moving down the table, filling the cups of the bride’s cousins with wine as red as blood. Grand Maester Pycelle had fallen asleep. *There is no one I can rely upon, not even Jaime*, she realized grimly. *I will need to sweep them all away and surround the king with mine own people.*

Later, after sweets and nuts and cheese had been served and cleared away, Margaery and Tommen began the dancing, looking more than a bit ridiculous as they whirled about the floor. The Tyrell girl stood a good foot and a half taller than her little husband, and Tommen was a clumsy dancer at best, with none of Joffrey’s easy grace. He did his earnest best, though, and seemed oblivious to the spectacle he was making of himself. And no sooner was Maid Margaery done with him than her cousins swooped in, one after the other, insisting that His Grace must dance with them as well. *They will have him stumbling and shuffling like a fool by the time they’re done*, Cersei thought resentfully as she watched. *Half the court will be laughing at him behind his back.*

Whilst Alla, Elinor, and Megga took their turns with Tommen, Margaery took a turn around the floor with her father, then another with her brother Loras. The Knight of Flowers was in white silk, with a belt of golden roses about his waist and a jade rose fastening his cloak. *They could be twins*, Cersei thought as she watched them. Ser Loras was a year older than his sister, but they had the same big brown eyes, the same thick brown hair falling in lazy ringlets to their shoulders, the same smooth unblemished skin. *A ripe crop of pimples would teach them some humility.* Loras was taller and had a few wisps of soft brown fuzz on his face, and Margaery had a woman’s shape, but otherwise they were more alike than she and Jaime. That annoyed her too.

Her own twin interrupted her musings. “Would Your Grace honor her white knight with a dance?”

She gave him a withering look. “And have you fumbling at me with that stump? No. I will let you fill my wine cup for me, though. If you think you can manage it without spilling.”

“A cripple like me? Not likely.” He moved away and made another circuit of the hall. She had to fill her own cup.

Cersei refused Mace Tyrell as well, and later Lancel. The others took the hint, and no one else approached her. *Our fast friends and loyal lords.* She could not even trust the westermen, her father’s sworn swords and bannermen. Not if her own uncle was conspiring with her enemies...

Margaery was dancing with her cousin Alla, Megga with Ser Tallad the Tall. The other cousin, Elinor, was sharing a cup of wine with the handsome young Bastard of Driftmark, Aurane Waters. It was not the first time the queen had made note of Waters, a lean young man with grey-green eyes and long silver-gold hair. The first time she had seen him, for half a heartbeat she had almost thought Rhaegar Targaryen had returned from the ashes. *It is his hair,* she told herself. *He is not half as comely as Rhaegar was. His face is too narrow, and he has that cleft in his chin.* The Velaryons came from old Valyrian stock, however, and some had the same silvery hair as the dragonkings of old.

Tommen returned to his seat to nibble at an applecake. Her uncle’s place was empty. The queen finally found him in a corner, talking intently with Mace Tyrell’s son Garlan. *What do they have to talk about?* The Reach might call Ser Garlan gallant, but she trusted him no more than Margaery or Loras. She had not forgotten the gold coin that Qyburn had discovered beneath the gaoler’s chamber pot. *A golden hand from Highgarden. And Margaery is spying on me.* When Senelle appeared to fill her wine cup, the queen had to resist an urge to take her by the throat and throttle her. *Do not presume to smile at me, you treacherous little bitch. You will be begging me for mercy before I’m done with you.*

“I think Her Grace has had enough wine for one night,” she heard her brother Jaime say.

No, the queen thought. *All the wine in the world would not be enough to see me through this wedding.* She rose so fast she almost fell. Jaime caught her by the arm and steadied her. She wrenched free and clapped her hands together. The music died, the voices stilled. “*Lords and ladies,*” Cersei called out loudly, “if you will be so good as to come outside with me, we shall light a candle to celebrate the union of Highgarden and Casterly Rock, and a new age of peace and plenty for our Seven Kingdoms.”

Dark and forlorn stood the Tower of the Hand, with only gaping holes where oaken doors and shuttered windows had once been. Yet even ruined and slighted, it loomed above the outer ward. As the wedding guests filed out of the Small Hall, they passed beneath its shadow. When Cersei looked up she saw the tower’s crenellated battlements gnawing at a hunter’s moon, and wondered for a moment how many Hands of how many kings had made their home there over the past three centuries.

A hundred yards from the tower, she took a breath to stop her head from spinning. “Lord Hallyne! You may commence.”

Hallyne the pyromancer said “*Hmmmmmm*” and waved the torch he was holding, and the archers on the walls bent their bows and sent a dozen flaming arrows through the gaping windows.

The tower went up with a *whoosh*. In half a heartbeat its interior was alive with light, red, yellow, orange... and green, an ominous dark green, the color of bile and jade and pyromancer’s piss. “The substance,” the alchemists named it, but common folk called it *wildfire*. Fifty pots had been placed inside the Tower of the Hand, along with logs and casks of pitch and the greater part of the worldly possessions of a dwarf named Tyrion Lannister.

The queen could feel the heat of those green flames. The pyromancers said that only three things burned hotter than their substance: dragonflame, the fires beneath the earth, and the summer sun. Some of the ladies gasped when the first flames appeared in the windows, licking up the outer walls like long green tongues. Others cheered, and made toasts.

*It is beautiful*, she thought, *as beautiful as Joffrey, when they laid him in my arms*. No man had ever made her feel as good as she had felt when he took her nipple in his mouth to nurse.

Tommen stared wide-eyed at the fires, as fascinated as he was frightened, until Margaery whispered something in his ear that made him laugh. Some of the knights began to make wagers on how long it would be before the tower collapsed. Lord Hallyne stood humming to himself and rocking on his heels.

Cersei thought of all the King's Hands that she had known through the years: Owen Merryweather, Jon Connington, Qarlton Chelsted, Jon Arryn, Eddard Stark, her brother Tyrion. And her father, Lord Tywin Lannister, her father most of all. *All of them are burning now*, she told herself, savoring the thought. *They are dead and burning, every one, with all their plots and schemes and betrayals. It is my day now. It is my castle and my kingdom.*

The Tower of the Hand gave out a sudden groan, so loud that all the conversation stopped abruptly. Stone cracked and split, and part of the upper battlements fell away and landed with a crash that shook the hill, sending up a cloud of dust and smoke. As fresh air rushed in through the broken masonry, the fire surged upward. Green flames leapt into the sky and whirled around each other. Tommen shied away, till Margaery took his hand and said, "Look, the flames are dancing. Just as we did, my love."

"They are." His voice was filled with wonder. "Mother, look, they're dancing."

"I see them. Lord Hallyne, how long will the fires burn?"

"All night, Your Grace."

"It makes a pretty candle, I grant you," said Lady Olenna Tyrell, leaning on her cane between Left and Right. "Bright enough to see us safe to sleep, I think. Old bones grow weary, and these young ones have had enough excitement for one night. It is time the king and queen were put to bed."

"Yes." Cersei beckoned to Jaime. "Lord Commander, escort His Grace and his little queen to their pillows, if you would."

“As you command. And you as well?”

“No need.” Cersei felt too alive for sleep. The wildfire was cleansing her, burning away all her rage and fear, filling her with resolve. “The flames are so pretty. I want to watch them for a while.”

Jaime hesitated. “You should not stay alone.”

“I will not be alone. Ser Osmund can remain with me and keep me safe. Your Sworn Brother.”

“If it please Your Grace,” said Kettleblack.

“It does.” Cersei slid her arm through his, and side by side they watched the fire rage.