

CERSEI

The day had been cold and grey and wet. It had poured all morning, and even when the rain stopped that afternoon the clouds refused to part. They never saw the sun. Such wretched weather was enough to discourage even the little queen. Instead of riding with her henns and their retinue of guardsmen and admirers, she spent all day in the Maidenvault with her henns, listening to the Blue Bard sing.

Cersei's own day was little better, till evenfall. As the grey sky began to fade to black, they told her that the *Sweet Cersei* had come in on the evening tide, and that Aurane Waters was without, begging audience.

The queen sent for him at once. As soon as he strode into her solar, she knew his tidings were good. "Your Grace," he said with a broad smile, "Dragonstone is yours."

"How splendid." She took his hands and kissed him on the cheeks. "I know Tommen will be pleased as well. This will mean that we can release Lord Redwyne's fleet, and drive the ironmen from the Shields." The news from the Reach seemed to grow more dire with every raven. The ironmen had not been content with their new rocks, it seemed. They were raiding up the Mander in strength, and had gone so far as to attack the Arbor and the smaller islands that surrounded it. The Redwynes had kept no more than a dozen warships in their home waters, and all those had been overwhelmed, taken, or sunk. And now there were reports that this madman who called himself Euron Crow's Eye was even sending longships up Whispering Sound toward Oldtown.

"Lord Paxter was taking on provisions for the voyage home when *Sweet Cersei* raised sail," Lord Waters reported. "I would imagine that by now his main fleet has put to sea."

"Let us hope they enjoy a swift voyage, and better weather than today." The queen drew Waters down into the window seat beside her. "Do we have Ser Loras to thank for this triumph?"

His smile vanished. "Some will say so, Your Grace."

"Some?" She gave him a quizzical look. "Not you?"

"I never saw a braver knight," Waters said, "but he turned what could have been a bloodless victory into a slaughter. A thousand men are dead, or near enough to make no matter. Most of them our own. And not just common men, Your Grace, but knights and young lords, the best and the bravest."

"And Ser Loras himself?"

"He will make a thousand and one. They carried him inside the castle after the battle, but his wounds are grievous. He has lost so much blood that the maesters will not even leech him."

"Oh, how sad. Tommen will be heartbroken. He did so admire our gallant Knight of Flowers."

"The smallfolk too," her admiral said. "We'll have maidens weeping into their wine all across the realm when Loras dies."

He was not wrong, the queen knew. Three thousand smallfolk had crowded through the Mud Gate to see Ser Loras off the day he sailed, and three of every four were women. The sight had only served to fill her with contempt. She had wanted to scream at them that they were sheep, to tell them that all that they could ever hope to get from Loras Tyrell was a smile and a flower. Instead she had proclaimed him the boldest knight in the Seven Kingdoms, and smiled as Tommen presented him with a jeweled sword to carry into battle. The king had given him a hug as well, which had not been part of Cersei's plans, but it made no matter now. She could afford to be generous. Loras Tyrell was dying.

"Tell me," Cersei commanded. "I want to know all of it, from the beginning to the end."

The room had grown dark by the time that he was done. The queen lit some candles and sent Dorcas to the kitchens to bring them up some bread and cheese and a bit of boiled beef with horseradish. As they supped, she bid Aurane to tell the tale again, so she would remember all the details

correctly. “I do not want our precious Margaery to hear these tidings from a stranger, after all,” she said. “I will tell her myself.”

“Your Grace is kind,” said Waters with a smile. *A wicked smile*, the queen thought. Aurane did not resemble Prince Rhaegar as much as she had thought. *He has the hair, but so do half the whores in Lys, if the tales are true. Rhaegar was a man. This is a sly boy, no more. Useful in his way, though.*

Margaery was in the Maidenvault, sipping wine and trying to puzzle out some new game from Volantis with her three cousins. Though the hour was late, the guards admitted Cersei at once. “Your Grace,” she began, “it is best you hear the news from me. Aurane is back from Dragonstone. Your brother is a hero.”

“I always knew he was.” Margaery did not seem surprised. *Why should she? She expected this, from the moment Loras begged for the command.* Yet by the time Cersei had finished with her tale, tears glistened on the cheeks of the younger queen. “Redwyne had miners working to drive a tunnel underneath the castle walls, but that was too slow for the Knight of Flowers. No doubt he was thinking of your lord father’s people suffering on the Shields. Lord Waters says he ordered the assault not half a day after taking command, after Lord Stannis’s castellan refused his offer to settle the siege between them in single combat. Loras was the first one through the breach when the ram broke the castle gates. He rode straight into the dragon’s mouth, they say, all in white and swinging his morningstar about his head, slaying left and right.”

Megga Tyrell was sobbing openly by then. “How did he die?” she asked. “Who killed him?”

“No one man has that honor,” said Cersei. “Ser Loras took a quarrel through the thigh and another through the shoulder, but he fought on gallantly, though the blood was streaming from him. Later he suffered a mace blow that broke some ribs. After that... but no, I would spare you the worst of it.”

“Tell me,” said Margaery. “I command it.”

Command it? Cersei paused a moment, then decided she would let that pass. “The defenders fell back to an inner keep once the curtain wall was taken. Loras led the attack there as well. He was doused with boiling oil.”

Lady Alla turned white as chalk, and ran from the room.

“The maesters are doing all they can, Lord Waters assures me, but I fear your brother is too badly burned.” Cersei took Margaery in her arms to comfort her. “He saved the realm.” When she kissed the little queen upon the cheek, she could taste the salt of her tears. “Jaime will enter all his deeds in the White Book, and the singers will sing of him for a thousand years.”

Margaery wrenched free of her embrace, so violently that Cersei almost fell. “Dying is not dead,” she said.

“No, but the maesters say—”

“Dying is not dead!”

“I only want to spare you—”

“I know what you want. Get out.”

Now you know how I felt, the night my Joffrey died. She bowed, her face a mask of cool courtesy. “Sweet daughter. I am so sad for you. I will leave you with your grief.”

Lady Merryweather did not appear that night, and Cersei found herself too restless to sleep. *If Lord Tywin could see me now, he would know he had his heir, an heir worthy of the Rock,* she thought as she lay abed with Jocelyn Swyft snoring softly into the other pillow. Margaery would soon be weeping the bitter tears she should have wept for Joffrey. Mace Tyrell might weep as well, but she had given him no cause to break with her. What had she done, after all, but honor Loras with her trust? He had requested the command on bended knee whilst half her court looked on.

When he dies I must raise a statue of him somewhere, and give him a funeral such as King’s Landing has never seen. The smallfolk would like that. So would Tommen. Mace may even thank me, poor man. As for his lady mother, if the gods are good this news will kill her.

The sunrise was the prettiest that Cersei had seen in years. Taena appeared soon thereafter, and confessed to having spent the night consoling Margaery and her ladies, drinking wine and crying and telling tales of Loras. “Margaery is still convinced he will not die,” she reported, as the queen was dressed for court. “She plans to send her own maester to look after him. The cousins are praying for the Mother’s mercy.”

“I shall pray as well. On the morrow, come with me to Baelor’s Sept, and we will light a hundred candles for our gallant Knight of Flowers.” She turned to her handmaid. “Dorcas, bring my crown. The new one, if you please.” It was lighter than the old, pale spun gold set with emeralds that sparkled when she turned her head.

“There are four come about the Imp this morning,” Ser Osmund said, when Jocelyn admitted him.

“Four?” The queen was pleasantly surprised. A steady stream of informers had been making their way to the Red Keep, claiming knowledge of Tyrion, but four in one day was unusual.

“Aye,” said Osmund. “One brought a head for you.”

“I will see him first. Bring him to my solar.” *This time, let there be no mistakes. Let me be avenged at long last, so Joff can rest in peace.* The septons said that the number seven was sacred to the gods. If so, perhaps this seventh head would bring her the balm her soul desired.

The man proved to be Tyroshi; short and stout and sweaty, with an unctuous smile that reminded her of Varys and a forked beard dyed green and pink. Cersei misliked him on sight, but was willing to overlook his flaws if he actually had Tyrion’s head inside the chest he carried. It was cedar, inlaid with ivory in a pattern of vines and flowers, with hinges and clasps of white gold. A lovely thing, but the queen’s only interest lay in what might be within. *It is big enough, at least. Tyrion had a grotesquely large head, for one so small and stunted.*

“Your Grace,” the Tyroshi murmured, bowing low, “I see you are as lovely as the tales. Even beyond the narrow sea we have heard of your great beauty, and the grief that tears your gentle heart. No man can restore your brave young son to you, but it is my hope I can at least offer you some balm

for your pain.” He laid his hand upon his chest. “I bring you justice. I bring you the head of your *valonqar*.”

The old Valyrian word sent a chill through her, though it also gave her a tingle of hope. “The Imp is no longer my brother, if he ever was,” she declared. “Nor will I say his name. It was a proud name once, before he dishonored it.”

“In Tyrosh we name him Redhands, for the blood running from his fingers. A king’s blood, and a father’s. Some say he slew his mother too, ripping his way from her womb with savage claws.”

What nonsense, Cersei thought. “’Tis true,” she said. “If the Imp’s head is in that chest, I shall raise you to lordship and grant you rich lands and keeps.” Titles were cheaper than dirt, and the riverlands were full of ruined castles, standing desolate amidst untended fields and burned villages. “My court awaits. Open the box and let us see.”

The Tyroshi threw open the box with a flourish, and stepped back smiling. Within, the head of a dwarf reposed upon a bed of soft blue velvet, staring up at her.

Cersei took a long look. “That is not my brother.” There was a sour taste in her mouth. *I suppose it was too much to hope for, especially after Loras. The gods are never that good.* “This man has brown eyes. Tyrion had one black eye and one green.”

“The eyes, just so... Your Grace, your brother’s own eyes had... somewhat decayed. I took the liberty of replacing them with glass... but of the wrong color, as you say.”

That only annoyed her further. “Your head may have glass eyes, but I do not. There are gargoyles on Dragonstone that look more like the Imp than this creature. He’s *bald*, and twice my brother’s age. What happened to his teeth?”

The man shrank before the fury in her voice. “He had a fine set of gold teeth, Your Grace, but we... I regret...”

“Oh, not yet. But you will.” I ought to have him strangled. Let him gasp for breath until his face turns black, the way my sweet son did. The

words were on her lips.

“An honest mistake. One dwarf looks so much like another, and... Your Grace will observe, he has no nose...”

“He has no nose because you *cut it off*.”

“No!” The sweat on his brow gave the lie to his denial.

“Yes.” A poisonous sweetness crept into Cersei’s tone. “At least you had that much sense. The last fool tried to tell me that a hedge wizard had regrown it. Still, it seems to me that you owe this dwarf a nose. House Lannister pays its debts, and so shall you. Ser Meryn, take this fraud to Qyburn.”

Ser Meryn Trant took the Tyroshi by the arm and hauled him off, still protesting. When they were gone, Cersei turned to Osmund Kettleblack. “Ser Osmund, get this thing out of my sight, and bring in the other three who claim knowledge of the Imp.”

“Aye, Your Grace.”

Sad to say, the three would-be informers proved no more useful than the Tyroshi. One said that the Imp was hiding in an Oldtown brothel, pleasuring men with his mouth. It made for a droll picture, but Cersei did not believe it for an instant. The second claimed to have seen the dwarf in a mummer’s show in Braavos. The third insisted Tyrion had become a hermit in the riverlands, living on some haunted hill. The queen made the same response to each. “If you will be so good as to lead some of my brave knights to this dwarf, you shall be richly rewarded,” she promised. “Provided that it *is* the Imp. If not... well, my knights have little patience for deception, nor fools who send them chasing after shadows. A man could lose his tongue.” And quick as that, all three informers suddenly lost faith, and allowed that perhaps it might have been some other dwarf they saw.

Cersei had never realized there were so many dwarfs. “Is the whole world overrun with these twisted little monsters?” she complained, whilst the last of the informers was being ushered out. “How many of them can there be?”

“Fewer than there were,” said Lady Merryweather. “May I have the honor of accompanying Your Grace to court?”

“If you can bear the tedium,” said Cersei. “Robert was a fool about most things, but he was right in one regard. It is wearisome work to rule a kingdom.”

“It saddens me to see Your Grace so careworn. I say, run off and play and leave the King’s Hand to hear these tiresome petitions. We could dress as serving girls and spend the day amongst the smallfolk, to hear what they are saying of the fall of Dragonstone. I know the inn where the Blue Bard plays when he is not singing attendance on the little queen, and a certain cellar where a conjurer turns lead into gold, water into wine, and girls into boys. Perhaps he would work his spells on the two of us. Would it amuse Your Grace to be a man one night?”

If I were a man I would be Jaime, the queen thought. *If I were a man I could rule this realm in my own name in place of Tommen’s*. “Only if you remained a woman,” she said, knowing that was what Taena wanted to hear. “You are a wicked thing to tempt me so, but what sort of queen would I be if I put my realm in the trembling hands of Harys Swyft?”

Taena pouted. “Your Grace is too diligent.”

“I am,” Cersei allowed, “and by day’s end I shall rue it.” She slipped her arm through Lady Merryweather’s. “Come.”

Jalabhar Xho was the first to petition her that day, as befit his rank as a prince in exile. Splendid as he looked in his bright feathered cloak, he had only come to beg. Cersei let him make his usual plea for men and arms to help him regain Red Flower Vale, then said, “His Grace is fighting his own war, Prince Jalabhar. He has no men to spare for yours just now. Next year, perhaps.” That was what Robert always told him. Next year she would tell him *never*, but not today. Dragonstone was hers.

Lord Hallyne of the Guild of Alchemists presented himself, to ask that his pyromancers be allowed to hatch any dragon’s eggs that might turn up upon Dragonstone, now that the isle was safely back in royal hands. “If any such eggs remained, Stannis would have sold them to pay for his rebellion,” the queen told him. She refrained from saying that the plan was mad. Ever

since the last Targaryen dragon had died, all such attempts had ended in death, disaster, or disgrace.

A group of merchants appeared before her to beg the throne to intercede for them with the Iron Bank of Braavos. The Braavosi were demanding repayment of their outstanding debts, it seemed, and refusing all new loans. *We need our own bank*, Cersei decided, *the Golden Bank of Lannisport*. Perhaps when Tommen's throne was secure, she could make that happen. For the nonce, all she could do was tell the merchants to pay the Braavosi usurers their due.

The delegation from the Faith was headed by her old friend Septon Raynard. Six of the Warrior's Sons escorted him across the city; together they were seven, a holy and propitious number. The new High Septon—or High Sparrow, as Moon Boy had dubbed him—did everything by sevens. The knights wore swordbelts striped in the seven colors of the Faith. Crystals adorned the pommels of their longswords and the crests of their greathelms. They carried kite shields of a style not common since the Conquest, displaying a device not seen in the Seven Kingdoms for centuries: a rainbow sword shining bright upon a field of darkness. Close to a hundred knights had already come forth to pledge their lives and swords to the Warrior's Sons, Qyburn claimed, and more turned up every day. *Drunk on the gods, the lot of them. Who would have thought the realm contained so many of them?*

Most had been household knights and hedge knights, but a handful were of high birth; younger sons, petty lords, old men wanting to atone for the old sins. And then there was Lancel. She had thought Qyburn must be japing when he had told her that her mooncalf cousin had forsaken castle, lands, and wife and wandered back to the city to join the Noble and Puissant Order of the Warrior's Sons, yet there he stood with the other pious fools.

Cersei liked that not at all. Nor was she pleased by the High Sparrow's endless truculence and ingratitude. "Where is the High Septon?" she demanded of Raynard. "It was him I summoned."

Septon Raynard assumed a regretful tone. "His High Holiness sent me in his stead, and bade me tell Your Grace that the Seven have sent him forth to battle wickedness."

"How? By preaching chastity along the Street of Silk? Does he think praying over whores will turn them back to virgins?"

"Our bodies were shaped by our Father and Mother so we might join male to female and beget trueborn children," Raynard replied. "It is base and sinful for women to sell their holy parts for coin."

The pious sentiment would have been more convincing if the queen had not known that Septon Raynard had special friends in every brothel on the Street of Silk. No doubt he had decided that echoing the High Sparrow's twitterings was preferable to scrubbing floors. "Do not presume to preach at me," she told him. "The brothel keepers have been complaining, and rightly so."

"If sinners speak, why should the righteous listen?"

"These sinners feed the royal coffers," the queen said bluntly, "and their pennies help pay the wages of my gold cloaks and build galleys to defend our shores. There is trade to be considered as well. If King's Landing had no brothels, the ships would go to Duskendale or Gulltown. His High Holiness promised me peace in my streets. Whoring helps to keep that peace. Common men deprived of whores are apt to turn to rape. Henceforth let His High Holiness do his praying in the sept where it belongs."

The queen had expected to hear from Lord Gyles as well, but instead Grand Maester Pycelle appeared, grey-faced and apologetic, to tell her that Rosby was too weak to leave his bed. "Sad to say, I fear Lord Gyles must join his noble forebears soon. May the Father judge him justly."

If Rosby dies, Mace Tyrell and the little queen will try and force Garth the Gross on me again. "Lord Gyles has had that cough for years, and it never killed him before," she complained. "He coughed through half of Robert's reign and all of Joffrey's. If he is dying now, it can only be because someone wants him dead."

Grand Maester Pycelle blinked in disbelief. “Your Grace? Wh-who would want Lord Gyles dead?”

“His heir, perhaps.” Or the little queen. “Some woman he once scorned.” Margaery and Mace and the Queen of Thorns, why not? Gyles is in their way. “An old enemy. A new one. You.”

The old man blanched. “Y-your Grace japes. I... I have purged his lordship, bled him, treated him with poultices and infusions... the mists give him some relief and sweetsleep helps with the violence of his coughing, but he is bringing up bits of lung with the blood now, I fear.”

“Be that as it may. You will return to Lord Gyles and inform him that he does not have my leave to die.”

“If it please Your Grace.” Pycelle bowed stiffly.

There was more, and more, and more, each petitioner more boring than the last. And that evening, when the last of them had finally gone and she was eating a simple supper with her son, she told him, “Tommen, when you say your prayers before bed, tell the Mother and the Father that you are thankful you are still a child. Being king is hard work. I promise you, you will not like it. They peck at you like a murder of crows. Every one wants a piece of your flesh.”

“Yes, Mother,” said Tommen, in a sad tone. The little queen had told him of Ser Loras, she understood. Ser Osmund said the boy had wept. *He is young. By the time he is Joff's age he will not recall what Loras looked like.* “I wouldn’t mind them pecking, though,” her son went on to say. “I should go to court with you every day, to listen. Margaery says—”

“—a deal too much,” Cersei snapped. “For half a groat I’d gladly have her tongue torn out.”

“*Don’t you say that,*” Tommen shouted suddenly, his round little face turning red. “You leave her tongue alone. Don’t you touch her. I’m the king, not you.”

She stared at him, incredulous. “What did you say?”

“I’m the king. I get to say who has their tongues torn out, not you. I won’t let you hurt Margaery. I *won’t*. I forbid it.”

Cersei took him by the ear and dragged him squealing to the door, where she found Ser Boros Blount standing guard. “Ser Boros, His Grace has forgotten himself. Kindly escort him to his bedchamber and bring up Pate. This time I want Tommen to whip the boy himself. He is to continue until the boy is bleeding from both cheeks. If His Grace refuses, or says one word of protest, summon Qyburn and tell him to remove Pate’s tongue, so His Grace can learn the cost of insolence.”

“As you command,” Ser Boros huffed, glancing at the king uneasily. “Your Grace, please come with me.”

As night fell over the Red Keep, Jocelyn kindled a fire in the queen’s hearth whilst Dorcas lit the bedside candles. Cersei opened the window for a breath of air, and found that the clouds had rolled back in to hide the stars. “Such a dark night, Your Grace,” murmured Dorcas.

Aye, she thought, but not so dark as in the Maidenvault, or on Dragonstone where Loras Tyrell lies burned and bleeding, or down in the black cells beneath the castle. The queen did not know why that occurred to her. She had resolved not to give Falyse another thought. Single combat. Falyse should have known better than to marry such a fool. The word from Stokeworth was that Lady Tanda had died of a chill in the chest, brought on by her broken hip. Lollys Lackwit had been proclaimed Lady Stokeworth, with Ser Bronn her lord. Tanda dead and Gyles dying. It is well that we have Moon Boy, or the court would be entirely bereft of fools. The queen smiled as she lay her head upon the pillow. When I kissed her cheek, I could taste the salt of her tears.

She dreamt an old dream, of three girls in brown cloaks, a wattled crone, and a tent that smelled of death.

The crone’s tent was dark, with a tall peaked roof. She did not want to go in, no more than she had wanted to at ten, but the other girls were watching her, so she could not turn away. They were three in the dream, as they had been in life. Fat Jeyne Farman hung back as she always did. It was a wonder she had come this far. Melara Hetherspoon was bolder, older, and prettier, in a freckly sort of way. Wrapped in roughspun cloaks with their hoods pulled up, the three of them had stolen from their beds and crossed

the tourney grounds to seek the sorceress. Melara had heard the serving girls whispering how she could curse a man or make him fall in love, summon demons and foretell the future.

In life the girls had been breathless and giddy, whispering to each other as they went, as excited as they were afraid. The dream was different. In the dream the pavilions were shadowed, and the knights and serving men they passed were made of mist. The girls wandered for a long while before they found the crone's tent. By the time they did all the torches were guttering out. Cersei watched the girls huddling, whispering to one another. *Go back*, she tried to tell them. *Turn away. There is nothing here for you.* But though she moved her mouth, no words came out.

Lord Tywin's daughter was the first through the flap, with Melara close behind her. Jeyne Farman came last, and tried to hide behind the other two, the way she always did.

The inside of the tent was full of smells. Cinnamon and nutmeg. Pepper, red and white and black. Almond milk and onions. Cloves and lemongrass and precious saffron, and stranger spices, rarer still. The only light came from an iron brazier shaped like a basilisk's head, a dim green light that made the walls of the tent look cold and dead and rotten. Had it been that way in life as well? Cersei could not seem to remember.

The sorceress was sleeping in the dream, as once she'd slept in life. *Leave her be*, the queen wanted to cry out. *You little fools, never wake a sleeping sorceress.* Without a tongue, she could only watch as the girl threw off her cloak, kicked the witch's bed, and said, "Wake up, we want our futures told."

When Maggy the Frog opened her eyes, Jeyne Farman gave a frightened squeak and fled the tent, plunging headlong back into the night. Plump stupid timid little Jeyne, pasty-faced and fat and scared of every shadow. *She was the wise one, though.* Jeyne lived on Fair Isle still. She had married one of her lord brother's bannermen and whelped a dozen children.

The old woman's eyes were yellow, and crusted all about with something vile. In Lannisport it was said that she had been young and beautiful when her husband had brought her back from the east with a load

of spices, but age and evil had left their marks on her. She was short, squat, and warty, with pebbly greenish jowls. Her teeth were gone and her dugs hung down to her knees. You could smell sickness on her if you stood too close, and when she spoke her breath was strange and strong and foul.

“Begone,” she told the girls, in a croaking whisper.

“We came for a foretelling,” young Cersei told her.

“Begone,” croaked the old woman, a second time.

“We heard that you can see into the morrow,” said Melara. “We just want to know what men we’re going to marry.”

“Begone,” croaked Maggy, a third time.

Listen to her, the queen would have cried if she had her tongue. You still have time to flee. Run, you little fools!

The girl with the golden curls put her hands upon her hips. “Give us our foretelling, or I’ll go to my lord father and have you whipped for insolence.”

“Please,” begged Melara. “Just tell us our futures, then we’ll go.”

“Some are here who have no futures,” Maggy muttered in her terrible deep voice. She pulled her robe about her shoulders and beckoned the girls closer. “Come, if you will not go. Fools. Come, yes. I must taste your blood.”

Melara paled, but not Cersei. A lioness does not fear a frog, no matter how old and ugly she might be. She should have gone, she should have listened, she should have run away. Instead she took the dagger Maggy offered her, and ran the twisted iron blade across the ball of her thumb. Then she did Melara too.

In the dim green tent, the blood seemed more black than red. Maggy’s toothless mouth trembled at the sight of it. “Here,” she whispered, “give it here.” When Cersei offered her hand, she sucked away the blood with gums as soft as a newborn babe’s. The queen could still remember how queer and cold her mouth had been.

“Three questions may you ask,” the crone said, once she’d had her drink. “You will not like my answers. Ask, or begone with you.”

Go, the dreaming queen thought, *hold your tongue, and flee*. But the girl did not have sense enough to be afraid.

“When will I wed the prince?” she asked.

“Never. You will wed the king.”

Beneath her golden curls, the girl’s face wrinkled up in puzzlement. For years after, she took those words to mean that she would not marry Rhaegar until after his father Aerys had died. “I *will* be queen, though?” asked the younger her.

“Aye.” Malice gleamed in Maggy’s yellow eyes. “Queen you shall be... until there comes another, younger and more beautiful, to cast you down and take all that you hold dear.”

Anger flashed across the child’s face. “If she tries I will have my brother kill her.” Even then she would not stop, willful child as she was. She still had one more question due her, one more glimpse into her life to come. “Will the king and I have children?” she asked.

“Oh, aye. Six-and-ten for him, and three for you.”

That made no sense to Cersei. Her thumb was throbbing where she’d cut it, and her blood was dripping on the carpet. *How could that be?* she wanted to ask, but she was done with her questions.

The old woman was not done with her, however. “Gold shall be their crowns and gold their shrouds,” she said. “And when your tears have drowned you, the *valonqar* shall wrap his hands about your pale white throat and choke the life from you.”

“What is a *valonqar*? Some monster?” The golden girl did not like that foretelling. “You’re a liar and a warty frog and a smelly old savage, and I don’t believe a word of what you say. Come away, Melara. She is not worth hearing.”

“I get three questions too,” her friend insisted. And when Cersei tugged upon her arm, she wriggled free and turned back to the crone. “Will I marry Jaime?” she blurted out.

You stupid girl, the queen thought, angry even now. *Jaime does not even know you are alive*. Back then her brother lived only for swords and

dogs and horses... and for her, his twin.

“Not Jaime, nor any other man,” said Maggy. “Worms will have your maidenhead. Your death is here tonight, little one. Can you smell her breath? She is very close.”

“The only breath we smell is yours,” said Cersei. There was a jar of some thick potion by her elbow, sitting on a table. She snatched it up and threw it into the old woman’s eyes. In life the crone had screamed at them in some queer foreign tongue, and cursed them as they fled her tent. But in the dream her face dissolved, melting away into ribbons of grey mist until all that remained were two squinting yellow eyes, the eyes of death.

The valonqar shall wrap his hands about your throat, the queen heard, but the voice did not belong to the old woman. The hands emerged from the mists of her dream and coiled around her neck; thick hands, and strong. Above them floated his face, leering down at her with his mismatched eyes. *No*, the queen tried to cry out, but the dwarf’s fingers dug deep into her neck, choking off her protests. She kicked and screamed to no avail. Before long she was making the same sound her son had made, the terrible thin sucking sound that marked Joff’s last breath on earth.

She woke gasping in the dark with her blanket wound about her neck. Cersei wrenched it off so violently that it tore, and sat up with her breasts heaving. *A dream*, she told herself, *an old dream and a tangled coverlet, that’s all it was*.

Taena was spending the night with the little queen again, so it was Dorcas asleep beside her. The queen shook the girl roughly by the shoulder. “Wake up, and find Pycelle. He’ll be with Lord Gyles, I expect. Fetch him here at once.” Still half asleep, Dorcas stumbled from the bed and went scampering across the chamber for her clothing, her bare feet rustling on the rushes.

Agas later, Grand Maester Pycelle entered shuffling, and stood before her with bowed head, blinking his heavy-lidded eyes and struggling not to yawn. He looked as if the weight of the huge maester’s chain about his wattled neck was dragging him down to the floor. Pycelle had been old as far back as Cersei could remember, but there was a time when he had also

been magnificent: richly clad, dignified, exquisitely courteous. His immense white beard had given him an air of wisdom. Tyrion had shaved his beard off, though, and what had grown back was pitiful, a few patchy tufts of thin, brittle hair that did little to hide the loose pink flesh beneath his sagging chin. *This is no man, she thought, only the ruins of one. The black cells robbed him of whatever strength he had. That, and the Imp's razor.*

"How old are you?" Cersei asked, abruptly.

"Four-and-eighty, if it please Your Grace."

"A younger man would please me more."

His tongue flicked across his lips. "I was but two-and-forty when the Conclave called me. Kaeth was eighty when they chose him, and Ellendor was nigh on ninety. The cares of office crushed them, and both were dead within a year of being raised. Merion came next, only six-and-sixty, but he died of a chill on his way to King's Landing. Afterward King Aegon asked the Citadel to send a younger man. He was the first king I served."

And Tommen shall be the last. "I need a potion from you. Something to help me sleep."

"A cup of wine before bed will oft—"

"I *drink* wine, you witless cretin. I require something stronger. Something that will not let me dream."

"You... Your Grace does not wish to dream?"

"What did I just say? Have your ears grown as feeble as your cock? Can you make me such a potion, or must I command Lord Qyburn to rectify another of your failures?"

"No. There is no need to involve that... to involve Qyburn. Dreamless sleep. You shall have your potion."

"Good. You may go." As he turned toward the door, though, she called him back. "One more thing. What does the Citadel teach concerning prophecy? Can our morrows be foretold?"

The old man hesitated. One wrinkled hand groped blindly at his chest, as if to stroke the beard that was not there. "Can our morrows be foretold?"

he repeated slowly. "Mayhaps. There are certain spells in the old books... but Your Grace might ask instead, '*Should* our morrows be foretold?' And to that I should answer, 'No.' Some doors are best left closed."

"See that you close mine as you leave." She should have known that he would give her an answer as useless as he was.

The next morning she broke her fast with Tommen. The boy seemed much subdued; ministering to Pate had served its purpose, it would seem. They ate fried eggs, fried bread, bacon, and some blood oranges newly come by ship from Dorne. Her son was attended by his kittens. As she watched the cats frolic about his feet, Cersei felt a little better. *No harm will ever come to Tommen whilst I still live.* She would kill half the lords in Westeros and all the common people, if that was what it took to keep him safe. "Go with Jocelyn," she told the boy after they had eaten.

Then she sent for Qyburn. "Is Lady Falyse still alive?"

"Alive, yes. Perhaps not entirely... comfortable."

"I see." Cersei considered a moment. "This man Bronn... I cannot say I like the notion of an enemy so close. His power all derives from Lollys. If we were to produce her elder sister..."

"Alas," said Qyburn. "I fear that Lady Falyse is no longer capable of ruling Stokeworth. Or, indeed, of feeding herself. I have learned a great deal from her, I am pleased to say, but the lessons have not been entirely without cost. I hope I have not exceeded Your Grace's instructions."

"No." Whatever she had intended, it was too late. There was no sense dwelling on such things. *It is better if she dies,* she told herself. *She would not want to go on living without her husband. Oaf that he was, the fool seemed fond of him.* "There is another matter. Last night I had a dreadful dream."

"All men are so afflicted, from time to time."

"This dream concerned a witch woman I visited as a child."

"A woods witch? Most are harmless creatures. They know a little herbcraft and some midwifery, but otherwise..."

“She was more than that. Half of Lannisport used to go to her for charms and potions. She was mother to a petty lord, a wealthy merchant upjumped by my grandsire. This lord’s father had found her whilst trading in the east. Some say she cast a spell on him, though more like the only charm she needed was the one between her thighs. She was not always hideous, or so they said. I don’t recall the woman’s name. Something long and eastern and outlandish. The smallfolk used to call her Maggy.”

“Maegi?”

“Is that how you say it? The woman would suck a drop of blood from your finger, and tell you what your morrows held.”

“Bloodmagic is the darkest kind of sorcery. Some say it is the most powerful as well.”

Cersei did not want to hear that. “This *maegi* made certain prophecies. I laughed at them at first, but... she foretold the death of one of my bedmaids. At the time she made the prophecy, the girl was one-and-ten, healthy as a little horse and safe within the Rock. Yet she soon fell down a well and drowned.” Melara had begged her never to speak of the things they heard that night in the *maegi*’s tent. *If we never talk about it we’ll soon forget, and then it will be just a bad dream we had*, Melara had said. *Bad dreams never come true*. The both of them had been so young, that had sounded almost wise.

“Do you still grieve for this friend of your childhood?” Qyburn asked. “Is that what troubles you, Your Grace?”

“Melara? No. I can hardly recall what she looked like. It is just... the *maegi* knew how many children I would have, and she knew of Robert’s bastards. Years before he’d sired even the first of them, she knew. She promised me I should be queen, but said another queen would come...” *Younger and more beautiful, she said*. “...another queen, who would take from me all I loved.”

“And you wish to forestall this prophecy?”

More than anything, she thought. “*Can* it be forestalled?”

“Oh, yes. Never doubt that.”

“How?”

“I think Your Grace knows how.”

She did. I knew it all along, she thought. Even in the tent. “If she tries I will have my brother kill her.”

Knowing what needed to be done was one thing, though; knowing how to do it was another. Jaime could no longer be relied on. A sudden sickness would be best, but the gods were seldom so obliging. *How then? A knife, a pillow, a cup of heart’s bane?* All of those posed problems. When an old man died in his sleep no one thought twice of it, but a girl of six-and-ten found dead in bed was certain to raise awkward questions. Besides, Margaery never slept alone. Even with Ser Loras dying, there were swords about her night and day.

Swords have two edges, though. The very men who guard her could be used to bring her down. The evidence would need to be so overwhelming that even Margaery’s own lord father would have no choice but to consent to her execution. That would not be easy. *Her lovers are not like to confess, knowing it would mean their heads as well as hers. Unless...*

The next day the queen came on Osmund Kettleblack in the yard, as he was sparring with one of the Redwyne twins. Which one she could not say; she had never been able to tell the two of them apart. She watched the swordplay for a while, then called Ser Osmund aside. “Walk with me a bit,” she said, “and tell me true. I want no empty boasting now, no talk of how a Kettleblack is thrice as good as any other knight. Much may ride upon your answer. Your brother Osney. How good a sword is he?”

“Good. You’ve seen him. He’s not as strong as me nor Osfryd, but he’s quick to the kill.”

“If it came to it, could he defeat Ser Boros Blount?”

“Boros the Belly?” Ser Osmund chortled. “He’s what, forty? Fifty? Half-drunk half the time, fat even when he’s sober. If he ever had a taste for battle, he’s lost it. Aye, Your Grace, if Ser Boros wants for killing, Osney could do it easy enough. Why? Has Boros done some treason?”

“No,” she said. *But Osney has.*