

CERSEI

“A *thousand ships!*” The little queen’s brown hair was tousled and uncombed, and the torchlight made her cheeks look flushed, as if she had just come from some man’s embrace. “Your Grace, this must be answered *fiercely!*” Her last word rang off the rafters and echoed through the cavernous throne room.

Seated on her gold-and-crimson high seat beneath the Iron Throne, Cersei could feel a growing tightness in her neck. *Must*, she thought. *She dares say “must” to me.* She itched to slap the Tyrell girl across the face. *She should be on her knees, begging for my help. Instead, she presumes to tell her rightful queen what she must do.*

“A thousand ships?” Ser Harys Swyft was wheezing. “Surely not. No lord commands a thousand ships.”

“Some frightened fool has counted double,” agreed Orton Merryweather. “That, or Lord Tyrell’s bannermen are lying to us, puffing up the numbers of the foe so we will not think them lax.”

The torches on the back wall threw the long, barbed shadow of the Iron Throne halfway to the doors. The far end of the hall was lost in darkness, and Cersei could not but feel that the shadows were closing around her too. *My enemies are everywhere, and my friends are useless.* She had only to glance at her councillors to know that; only Lord Qyburn and Aurane Waters seemed awake. The others had been roused from bed by Margaery’s messengers pounding on their doors, and stood there rumpled and confused. Outside the night was black and still. The castle and the city slept. Boros Blount and Meryn Trant seemed to be sleeping too, albeit on their feet. Even Osmund Kettleblack was yawning. *Not Loras, though. Not our Knight of Flowers.* He stood behind his little sister, a pale shadow with a longsword on his hip.

“Half as many ships would still be five hundred, my lord,” Waters pointed out to Orton Merryweather. “Only the Arbor has enough strength at

sea to oppose a fleet that size.”

“What of your new dromonds?” asked Ser Harys. “The longships of the ironmen cannot stand before our dromonds, surely? *King Robert’s Hammer* is the mightiest warship in all Westeros.”

“She was,” said Waters. “*Sweet Cersei* will be her equal, once complete, and *Lord Tywin* will be twice the size of either. Only half are fitted out, however, and none is fully crewed. Even when they are, the numbers would be greatly against us. The common longship is small compared to our galleys, this is true, but the ironmen have larger ships as well. Lord Balon’s *Great Kraken* and the warships of the Iron Fleet were made for battle, not for raids. They are the equal of our lesser war galleys in speed and strength, and most are better crewed and captained. The ironmen live their whole lives at sea.”

Robert should have scoured the isles after Balon Greyjoy rose against him, Cersei thought. He smashed their fleet, burned their towns, and broke their castles, but when he had them on their knees he let them up again. He should have made another island of their skulls. That was what her father would have done, but Robert never had the stomach that a king requires if he hopes to keep peace in the realm. “The ironmen have not dared raid the Reach since Dagon Greyjoy sat the Seastone Chair,” she said. “Why would they do so now? What has emboldened them?”

“Their new king.” Qyburn stood with his hands hidden up his sleeves. “Lord Balon’s brother. The Crow’s Eye, he is called.”

“Carrion crows make their feasts upon the carcasses of the dead and dying,” said Grand Maester Pycelle. “They do not descend upon hale and healthy animals. Lord Euron will gorge himself on gold and plunder, aye, but as soon as we move against him he will back to Pyke, as Lord Dagon was wont to do in his day.”

“You are wrong,” said Margaery Tyrell. “Reavers do not come in such strength. *A thousand ships!* Lord Hewett and Lord Chester are slain, as well as Lord Serry’s son and heir. Serry has fled to Highgarden with what few ships remain him, and Lord Grimm is a prisoner in his own castle. Willas says that the iron king has raised up four lords of his own in their places.”

Willas, Cersei thought, the cripple. He is to blame for this. That oaf Mace Tyrell left the defense of the Reach in the hands of a hapless weakling. “It is a long voyage from the Iron Isles to the Shields,” she pointed out. “How could a thousand ships come all that way without being seen?”

“Willas believes that they did not follow the coast,” said Margaery. “They made the voyage out of sight of land, sailing far out into the Sunset Sea and swooping back in from the west.”

More like the cripple did not have his watchtowers manned, and now he fears to have us know it. The little queen is making excuses for her brother. Cersei’s mouth was dry. I need a cup of Arbor gold. If the ironmen decided to take the Arbor next, the whole realm might soon be going thirsty. “Stannis may have had a hand in this. Balon Greyjoy offered my lord father an alliance. Perhaps his son has offered one to Stannis.”

Pycelle frowned. “What would Lord Stannis gain by...”

“He *gains* another foothold. And plunder, that as well. Stannis needs gold to pay his sellswords. By raiding in the west, he hopes he can distract us from Dragonstone and Storm’s End.”

Lord Merryweather nodded. “A diversion. Stannis is more cunning than we knew. Your Grace is clever to have seen through his ploy.”

“Lord Stannis is striving to win the northmen to his cause,” said Pycelle. “If he befriends the ironborn, he cannot hope...”

“The northmen will not have him,” said Cersei, wondering how such a learned man could be so stupid. “Lord Manderly hacked the head and hands off the onion knight, we have that from the Freys, and half a dozen other northern lords have rallied to Lord Bolton. *The enemy of my enemy is my friend*. Where else can Stannis turn, but to the ironmen and the wildlings, the enemies of the north? But if he thinks that I am going to walk into his trap, he is a bigger fool than you.” She turned back to the little queen. “The Shield Islands belong to the Reach. Grimm and Serry and the rest are sworn to Highgarden. It is for Highgarden to answer this.”

“Highgarden shall answer,” said Margaery Tyrell. “Willas has sent word to Leyton Hightower in Oldtown, so he can see to his own defenses. Garlan is gathering men to retake the isles. The best part of our power remains with my lord father, though. We must send word to him at Storm’s End. At once.”

“And lift the siege?” Cersei did not care for Margaery’s presumption. *She says “at once” to me. Does she take me for her handmaid?* “I have no doubt that Lord Stannis would be pleased by that. Have you been listening, my lady? If he can draw our eyes away from Dragonstone and Storm’s End to these rocks...”

“*Rocks?*” gasped Margaery. “Did Your Grace say *rocks?*”

The Knight of Flowers put a hand upon his sister’s shoulder. “If it please Your Grace, from those *rocks* the ironmen threaten Oldtown and the Arbor. From strongholds on the Shields, raiders can sail up the Mander into the very heart of the Reach, as they did of old. With enough men they might even threaten Highgarden.”

“Truly?” said the queen, all innocence. “Why then, your brave brothers had best roust them off those rocks, and quickly.”

“How would the queen suggest they accomplish that, without sufficient ships?” asked Ser Loras. “Willas and Garlan can raise ten thousand men within a fortnight and twice that in a moon’s turn, but they cannot walk on water, Your Grace.”

“Highgarden sits above the Mander,” Cersei reminded him. “You and your vassals command a thousand leagues of coast. Are there no fisherfolk along your shores? Do you have no pleasure barges, no ferries, no river galleys, no skiffs?”

“Many and more,” Ser Loras admitted.

“Such should be more than sufficient to carry a host across a little stretch of water, I would think.”

“And when the longships of the ironborn descend upon our ragtag fleet as it is making its way across this ‘little stretch of water,’ what would Your Grace have us do then?”

Drown, thought Cersei. “Highgarden has gold as well. You have my leave to hire sellsails from beyond the narrow sea.”

“Pirates out of Myr and Lys, you mean?” Loras said with contempt. “The scum of the Free Cities?”

He is as insolent as his sister. “Sad to say, all of us must deal with scum from time to time,” she said with poisonous sweetness. “Perhaps you have a better notion?”

“Only the Arbor has sufficient galleys to retake the mouth of the Mander from the ironmen and protect my brothers from their longships during their crossing. I beg Your Grace, send word to Dragonstone and command Lord Redwyne to raise his sails at once.”

At least he has the sense to beg. Paxter Redwyne owned two hundred warships, and five times as many merchant carracks, wine cogs, trading galleys, and whalers. Redwyne was encamped beneath the walls of Dragonstone, however, and the greater part of his fleet was engaged in ferrying men across Blackwater Bay for the assault on that island stronghold. The remainder prowled Shipbreaker Bay to the south, where only their presence prevented Storm’s End from being resupplied by sea.

Aurane Waters bristled at Ser Loras’s suggestion. “If Lord Redwyne sails his ships away, how are we to supply our men on Dragonstone? Without the Arbor’s galleys, how will we maintain the siege of Storm’s End?”

“The siege can be resumed later, after—”

Cersei cut him off. “Storm’s End is a hundred times more valuable than the Shields, and Dragonstone... so long as Dragonstone remains in the hands of Stannis Baratheon, it is a knife at my son’s throat. We will release Lord Redwyne and his fleet when the castle falls.” The queen pushed herself to her feet. “This audience is at an end. Grand Maester Pycelle, a word.”

The old man started, as if her voice had woken him from some dream of youth, but before he could answer, Loras Tyrell strode forward, so swiftly that the queen drew back in alarm. She was about to shout for Ser

Osmund to defend her when the Knight of Flowers sank to one knee. “Your Grace, let me take Dragonstone.”

His sister’s hand went to her mouth. “Loras, no.”

Ser Loras ignored her plea. “It will take half a year or more to starve Dragonstone into submission, as Lord Paxter means to do. Give me the command, Your Grace. The castle will be yours within a fortnight if I have to tear it down with my bare hands.”

No one had given Cersei such a lovely gift since Sansa Stark had run to her to divulge Lord Eddard’s plans. She was pleased to see that Margaery had gone pale. “Your courage takes my breath away, Ser Loras,” Cersei said. “Lord Waters, are any of the new dromonds fit to put to sea?”

“*Sweet Cersei* is, Your Grace. A swift ship, and as strong as the queen she’s named for.”

“Splendid. Let *Sweet Cersei* carry our Knight of Flowers to Dragonstone at once. Ser Loras, the command is yours. Swear to me that you shall not return until Dragonstone is Tommen’s.”

“I shall, Your Grace.” He rose.

Cersei kissed him on both cheeks. She kissed his sister too, and whispered, “You have a gallant brother.” Either Margaery did not have the grace to answer or fear had stolen all her words.

Dawn was still several hours away when Cersei slipped out the king’s door behind the Iron Throne. Ser Osmund went before her with a torch and Qyburn strolled along beside her. Pycelle had to struggle to keep up. “If it please Your Grace,” he puffed, “young men are overbold, and think only of the glory of battle and never of its dangers. Ser Loras... this plan of his is fraught with peril. To storm the very walls of Dragonstone...”

“...is *very* brave.”

“...brave, yes, but...”

“I have no doubt that our Knight of Flowers will be the first man to gain the battlements.” *And perhaps the first to fall.* The pox-scarred bastard that Stannis had left to hold his castle was no callow tourney champion but a seasoned killer. If the gods were good, he would give Ser Loras the

glorious end he seemed to want. *Assuming the boy does not drown on the way.* There had been another storm last night, a savage one. The rain had come down in black sheets for hours. *And wouldn't that be sad?* the queen mused. *Drowning is ordinary. Ser Loras lusts for glory as real men lust for women, the least the gods can do is grant him a death worthy of a song.*

No matter what befell the boy on Dragonstone, however, the queen would be the winner. If Loras took the castle, Stannis would suffer a grievous blow, and the Redwyne fleet could sail off to meet the ironmen. If he failed, she would see to it that he had the lion's share of the blame. Nothing tarnishes a hero as much as failure. *And if he should come home on his shield, covered in blood and glory, Ser Osney will be there to console his grieving sister.*

The laugh would not be contained any longer. It burst from Cersei's lips, and echoed down the hall.

"Your Grace?" Grand Maester Pycelle blinked, his mouth sagging open. "Why... why would you laugh?"

"Why," she had to say, "elsewise I might weep. My heart is bursting with love for our Ser Loras and his valor."

She left the Grand Maester on the serpentine steps. *That one has outlived any usefulness he ever had,* the queen decided. All Pycelle ever seemed to do of late was plague her with cautions and objections. He had even objected to the understanding she had reached with the High Septon, gaping at her with dim and rheumy eyes when she commanded him to prepare the necessary papers and babbling about old dead history until Cersei cut him off. "King Maegor's day is done, and so are his decrees," she said firmly. "This is King Tommen's day, and mine." *I would have done better to let him perish in the black cells.*

"Should Ser Loras fall, Your Grace will need to find another worthy for the Kingsguard," Lord Qyburn said as they crossed over the spiked moat that girded Maegor's Holdfast.

"Someone splendid," she agreed. "Someone so young and swift and strong that Tommen will forget all about Ser Loras. A bit of gallantry would

not be amiss, but his head should not be full of foolish notions. Do you know of such a man?"

"Alas, no," said Qyburn. "I had another sort of champion in mind. What he lacks in gallantry he will give you tenfold in devotion. He will protect your son, kill your enemies, and keep your secrets, and no living man will be able to withstand him."

"So you say. Words are wind. When the hour is ripe, you may produce this paragon of yours and we will see if he is all that you have promised."

"They will sing of him, I swear it." Lord Qyburn's eyes crinkled with amusement. "Might I ask about the armor?"

"I have placed your order. The armorer thinks that I am mad. He assures me that no man is strong enough to move and fight in such a weight of plate." Cersei gave the chainless maester a warning look. "Play me for a fool, and you'll die screaming. You are aware of that, I trust?"

"Always, Your Grace."

"Good. Say no more of this."

"The queen is wise. These walls have ears."

"So they do." At night Cersei sometimes heard soft sounds, even in her own apartments. *Mice in the walls*, she would tell herself, *no more than that*.

A candle was burning by her bedside, but the hearthfire had gone out and there was no other light. The room was cold as well. Cersei undressed and slipped beneath the blankets, leaving her gown to puddle on the floor. Across the bed, Taena stirred. "Your Grace," she murmured softly. "What hour is it?"

"The hour of the owl," the queen replied.

Though Cersei often slept alone, she had never liked it. Her oldest memories were of sharing a bed with Jaime, when they had still been so young that no one could tell the two of them apart. Later, after they were separated, she'd had a string of bedmaids and companions, most of them girls of an age with her, the daughters of her father's household knights and bannermen. None had pleased her, and few lasted very long. *Little sneaks*,

the lot of them. Vapid, weepy creatures, always telling tales and trying to worm their way between me and Jaime. Still, there had been nights deep within the black bowels of the Rock when she had welcomed their warmth beside her. An empty bed was a cold bed.

Here most of all. There were chills in this room, and her wretched royal husband had died beneath this canopy. *Robert Baratheon, the First of His Name, may there never be a second. A dim, drunken brute of a man. Let him weep in hell.* Taena warmed the bed as well as Robert ever had, and never tried to force Cersei's legs apart. Of late she had shared the queen's bed more often than Lord Merryweather's. Orton did not seem to mind... or if he did, he knew better than to say so.

"I was concerned when I woke and found you gone," murmured Lady Merryweather, sitting up against the pillows, the coverlets tangled about her waist. "Is aught amiss?"

"No," said Cersei, "all is well. On the morrow Ser Loras will sail for Dragonstone, to win the castle, loose the Redwyne fleet, and prove his manhood to us all." She told the Myrish woman all that had occurred beneath the shifting shadow of the Iron Throne. "Without her valiant brother, our little queen is next to naked. She has her guards, to be sure, but I have their captain here and there about the castle. A garrulous old man with a squirrel on his surcoat. Squirrels run from lions. He does not have it in him to defy the Iron Throne."

"Margaery has other swords about her," cautioned Lady Merryweather. "She has made many friends about the court, and she and her young cousins all have admirers."

"A few suitors do not concern me," Cersei said. "The army at Storm's End, however..."

"What do you mean to do, Your Grace?"

"Why do you ask?" The question was a little too pointed for Cersei's taste. "I do hope you are not thinking of sharing my idle musings with our poor little queen?"

"Never. I am not that girl Senelle."

Cersei did not care to think about Senelle. *She repaid my kindness with betrayal.* Sansa Stark had done the same. So had Melara Hetherspoon and fat Jeyne Farman when the three of them were girls. *I would never have gone into that tent if not for them. I would never have allowed Maggy the Frog to taste my morrows in a drop of blood.* “I would be very sad if you ever betrayed my trust, Taena. I would have no choice but to give you to Lord Qyburn, but I know that I should weep.”

“I will never give you cause to weep, Your Grace. If I do, say the word, and I will give myself to Qyburn. I want only to be close to you. To serve you, however you require.”

“And for this service, what reward will you expect?”

“Nothing. It pleases me to please you.” Taena rolled onto her side, her olive skin shining in the candlelight. Her breasts were larger than the queen’s and tipped with huge nipples, black as horn. *She is younger than I am. Her breasts have not begun to sag.* Cersei wondered what it would feel like to kiss another woman. Not lightly on the cheek, as was common courtesy amongst ladies of high birth, but full upon the lips. Taena’s lips were very full. She wondered what it would feel like to suckle on those breasts, to lay the Myrish woman on her back and push her legs apart and use her as a man would use her, the way Robert would use *her* when the drink was in him, and she was unable to bring him off with hand or mouth.

Those had been the worst nights, lying helpless underneath him as he took his pleasure, stinking of wine and grunting like a boar. Usually he rolled off and went to sleep as soon as it was done, and was snoring before his seed could dry upon her thighs. She was always sore afterward, raw between the legs, her breasts painful from the mauling he would give them. The only time he’d ever made her wet was on their wedding night.

Robert had been handsome enough when they first married, tall and strong and powerful, but his hair was black and heavy, thick on his chest and coarse around his sex. *The wrong man came back from the Trident,* the queen would sometimes think as he was plowing her. In the first few years, when he mounted her more often, she would close her eyes and pretend that

he was Rhaegar. She could not pretend that he was Jaime; he was too different, too unfamiliar. Even the *smell* of him was wrong.

For Robert, those nights never happened. Come morning he remembered nothing, or so he would have had her believe. Once, during the first year of their marriage, Cersei had voiced her displeasure the next day. “You hurt me,” she complained. He had the grace to look ashamed. “It was not me, my lady,” he said in a sulky sullen tone, like a child caught stealing apple cakes from the kitchen. “It was the wine. I drink too much wine.” To wash down his admission, he reached for his horn of ale. As he raised it to his mouth, she smashed her own horn in his face, so hard she chipped a tooth. Years later at a feast, she heard him telling a serving wench how he’d cracked the tooth in a *mêlée*. *Well, our marriage was a mêlée*, she reflected, *so he did not lie*.

The rest had all been lies, though. He *did* remember what he did to her at night, she was convinced of that. She could see it in his eyes. He only pretended to forget; it was easier to do that than to face his shame. Deep down Robert Baratheon was a coward. In time the assaults did grow less frequent. During the first year he took her at least once a fortnight; by the end it was not even once a year. He never stopped completely, though. Sooner or later there would always come a night when he would drink too much and want to claim his rights. What shamed him in the light of day gave him pleasure in the darkness.

“My queen?” said Taena Merryweather. “You have a strange look in your eyes. Are you unwell?”

“I was just... remembering.” Her throat was dry. “You are a good friend, Taena. I have not had a true friend in...”

Someone hammered at the door.

Again? The urgency of the sound made her shiver. *Have another thousand ships descended on us?* She slipped into a bedrobe and went to see who it was. “Beg pardon for disturbing you, Your Grace,” the guardsman said, “but Lady Stokeworth is below, begging audience.”

“At this hour?” snapped Cersei. “Has Falyse lost her wits? Tell her I have retired. Tell her that smallfolk on the Shields are being slaughtered.

Tell her that I have been awake for half the night. I will see her on the morrow.”

The guard hesitated. “If it please Your Grace, she’s... she’s not in a good way, if you take my meaning.”

Cersei frowned. She had assumed Falyse was here to tell her that Bronn was dead. “Very well. I shall need to dress. Take her to my solar and have her wait.” When Lady Merryweather made to rise and come with her, the queen demurred. “No, stay. One of us should get some rest, at least. I shan’t be long.”

Lady Falyse’s face was bruised and swollen, her eyes red from her tears. Her lower lip was broken, her clothing soiled and torn. “Gods be good,” Cersei said as she ushered her into the solar and closed the door. “What has happened to your face?”

Falyse did not seem to hear the question. “He *killed* him,” she said in a quavery voice. “Mother have mercy, he... he...” She broke down sobbing, her whole body trembling.

Cersei poured a cup of wine and took it to the weeping woman. “Drink this. The wine will calm you. That’s it. A little more now. Stop that weeping and tell me why you’re here.”

It took the rest of the flagon before the queen was finally able to coax the whole sad tale out of Lady Falyse. Once she had, she did not know whether to laugh or rage. “Single combat,” she repeated. *Is there no one in the Seven Kingdoms that I can rely upon? Am I the only one in Westeros with a pinch of wits?* “You are telling me Ser Balman challenged Bronn to *single combat*?”

“He said it would be s-s-simple. The lance is a kn-knight’s weapon, he said, and B-Bronn was no true knight. Balman said he would unhorse him and finish him as he lay st-st-stunned.”

Bronn was no knight, that was true. Bronn was a battle-hardened killer. *Your cretin of a husband wrote his own death warrant.* “A splendid plan. Dare I ask how it went awry?”

“B-Bronn drove his lance through the chest of Balman’s poor *h-h-h-horse*. Balman, he... his legs were crushed when the beast fell. He screamed so piteously...”

Sellswords have no pity, Cersei might have said. “I asked you to arrange a hunting mishap. An arrow gone astray, a fall from a horse, an angry boar... there are so many ways a man can die in the woods. None of them involving *lances*.”

Falyse did not seem to hear her. “When I tried to run to my Balman, he, he, he *struck* me in the face. He made my lord c-c-confess. Balman was crying out for Maester Frenken to attend him, but the sellsword, he, he, he...”

“Confess?” Cersei did not like that word. “I trust our brave Ser Balman held his tongue.”

“Bronn put a dagger in his *eye*, and told me I had best be gone from Stokeworth before the sun went down or I’d get the same. He said he’d pass me around to the g-g-garrison, if any of them would have me. When I ordered Bronn seized, one of his knights had the insolence to say that I should do as Lord Stokeworth said. He called him *Lord Stokeworth!*” Lady Falyse clutched at the queen’s hand. “Your Grace must give me knights. A hundred knights! And crossbowmen, to take my castle back. Stokeworth is mine! They would not even permit me to gather up my *clothes!* Bronn said they were his wife’s clothes now, all my s-silks and velvets.”

Your rags are the least of your concern. The queen pulled her fingers free of the other woman’s clammy grasp. “I asked you to snuff out a candle to help protect the king. Instead you heaved a pot of wildfire at it. Did your witless Balman bring my name into this? Tell me he did not.”

Falyse licked her lips. “He... he was in pain, his legs were broken. Bronn said he would show him mercy, but... What will happen to my poor m-m-mother?”

I imagine she will die. “What do you think?” Lady Tanda might well be dead already. Bronn did not seem the sort of man who would expend much effort nursing an old woman with a broken hip.

“You have to help me. Where am I to go? What will I do?”

Perhaps you might wed Moon Boy, Cersei almost said. He is nigh as big a fool as your late husband. She could not risk a war on the very doorstep of King’s Landing, not now. “The silent sisters are always glad to welcome widows,” she said. “Theirs is a serene life, a life of prayer and contemplation and good works. They bring solace to the living and peace to the dead.” *And they do not talk.* She could not have the woman running about the Seven Kingdoms spreading dangerous tales.

Falyse was deaf to good sense. “All we did, we did in service to Your Grace. *Proud to Be Faithful.* You said...”

“I recall.” Cersei forced a smile. “You shall stay here with us, my lady, until such time as we find a way to win your castle back. Let me pour you another cup of wine. It will help you sleep. You are weary and sick of heart, that’s plain to see. My poor dear Falyse. That’s it, drink up.”

As her guest was working on the flagon, Cersei went to the door and called her maids. She told Dorcas to find Lord Qyburn for her and bring him here at once. Jocelyn Swyft she dispatched to the kitchens. “Bring bread and cheese, a meat pie and some apples. And wine. We have a thirst.”

Qyburn arrived before the food. Lady Falyse had put down three more cups by then, and was beginning to nod, though from time to time she would rouse and give another sob. The queen took Qyburn aside and told him of Ser Balman’s folly. “I cannot have Falyse spreading tales about the city. Her grief has made her witless. Do you still need women for your... work?”

“I do, Your Grace. The puppeteers are quite used up.”

“Take her and do with her as you will, then. But once she goes down into the black cells... need I say more?”

“No, Your Grace. I understand.”

“Good.” The queen donned her smile once again. “Sweet Falyse, Maester Qyburn’s here. He’ll help you rest.”

“Oh,” said Falyse vaguely. “Oh, good.”

When the door closed behind them Cersei poured herself another cup of wine. "I am surrounded by enemies and imbeciles," she said. She could not even trust to her own blood and kin, nor Jaime, who had once been her other half. *He was meant to be my sword and shield, my strong right arm. Why does he insist on vexing me?*

Bronn was no more than an annoyance, to be sure. She had never truly believed that he was harboring the Imp. Her twisted little brother was too clever to allow Lollys to name her wretched ill-begotten bastard after him, knowing it was sure to draw the queen's wrath down upon her. Lady Merryweather had pointed that out, and she was right. The mockery was almost certainly the sellsword's doing. She could picture him watching his wrinkled red stepson sucking on one of Lollys's swollen dugs, a cup of wine in his hand and an insolent smile on his face. *Grin all you wish, Ser Bronn, you'll be screaming soon enough. Enjoy your lackwit lady and your stolen castle whilst you can. When the time comes, I shall swat you as if you were a fly.* Perhaps she would send Loras Tyrell to do the swatting, if the Knight of Flowers should somehow return alive from Dragonstone. *That would be delicious. If the gods were good, each of them would kill the other, like Ser Arryk and Ser Erryk.* As for Stokeworth... no, she was sick of thinking about Stokeworth.

Taena had drifted back to sleep by the time the queen returned to the bedchamber, her head spinning. *Too much wine and too little sleep,* she told herself. It was not every night that she was awakened twice with such desperate tidings. *At least I could awaken. Robert would have been too drunk to rise, let alone rule. It would have fallen to Jon Arryn to deal with all of this.* It pleased her to think that she made a better king than Robert.

The sky outside the window was already beginning to lighten. Cersei sat on the bed beside Lady Merryweather, listening to her soft breathing, watching her breasts rise and fall. *Does she dream of Myr?* she wondered. *Or is it her lover with the scar, the dangerous dark-haired man who would not be refused?* She was quite certain Taena was not dreaming of Lord Orton.

Cersei cupped the other woman's breast. Softly at first, hardly touching, feeling the warmth of it beneath her palm, the skin as smooth as satin. She gave it a gentle squeeze, then ran her thumbnail lightly across the big dark nipple, back and forth and back and forth until she felt it stiffen. When she glanced up, Taena's eyes were open. "Does that feel good?" she asked.

"Yes," said Lady Merryweather.

"And this?" Cersei pinched the nipple now, pulling on it hard, twisting it between her fingers.

The Myrish woman gave a gasp of pain. "You're hurting me."

"It's just the wine. I had a flagon with my supper, and another with the widow Stokeworth. I had to drink to keep her calm." She twisted Taena's other nipple too, pulling until the other woman gasped. "I am the queen. I mean to claim my rights."

"Do what you will." Taena's hair was as black as Robert's, even down between her legs, and when Cersei touched her there she found her hair all sopping wet, where Robert's had been coarse and dry. "Please," the Myrish woman said, "go on, my queen. Do as you will with me. I'm yours."

But it was no good. She could not feel it, whatever Robert felt on the nights he took her. There was no pleasure in it, not for her. For Taena, yes. Her nipples were two black diamonds, her sex slick and steamy. *Robert would have loved you, for an hour.* The queen slid a finger into that Myrish swamp, then another, moving them in and out, *but once he spent himself inside you, he would have been hard-pressed to recall your name.*

She wanted to see if it would be as easy with a woman as it had always been with Robert. *Ten thousand of your children perished in my palm, Your Grace,* she thought, slipping a third finger into Myr. *Whilst you snored, I would lick your sons off my face and fingers one by one, all those pale sticky princes. You claimed your rights, my lord, but in the darkness I would eat your heirs.* Taena gave a shudder. She gasped some words in a foreign tongue, then shuddered again and arched her back and screamed. *She sounds as if she is being gored,* the queen thought. For a moment she let

herself imagine that her fingers were a bore's tusks, ripping the Myrish woman apart from groin to throat.

It was still no good.

It had never been any good with anyone but Jaime.

When she tried to take her hand away, Taena caught it and kissed her fingers. "Sweet queen, how shall I pleasure you?" She slid her hand down Cersei's side and touched her sex. "Tell me what you would have of me, my love."

"Leave me." Cersei rolled away and pulled up the bedclothes to cover herself, shivering. Dawn was breaking. It would be morning soon, and all of this would be forgotten.

It had never happened.