

CERSEI

Septa Moelle was a white-haired harridan with a face as sharp as an axe and lips pursed in perpetual disapproval. *This one still has her maidenhead, I'll wager*, Cersei thought, *though by now it's hard and stiff as boiled leather*. Six of the High Sparrow's knights escorted her, with the rainbow sword of their reborn order emblazoned on their kite shields.

"Septa." Cersei sat beneath the Iron Throne, clad in green silk and golden lace. "Tell his High Holiness that we are vexed with him. He presumes too much." Emeralds glimmered on her fingers and in her golden hair. The eyes of court and city were upon her, and she meant for them to see Lord Tywin's daughter. By the time this mummer's farce was done they would know they had but one true queen. *But first we must dance the dance and never miss a step*. "Lady Margaery is my son's true and gentle wife, his helpmate and consort. His High Holiness had no cause to lay his hands upon her person, or to confine her and her young cousins, who are so dear to all of us. I demand that he release them."

Septa Moelle's stern expression did not flicker. "I shall convey Your Grace's words to His High Holiness, but it grieves me to say that the young queen and her ladies cannot be released until and unless their innocence has been proved."

"*Innocence?* Why, you need only look upon their sweet young faces to see how innocent they are."

"A sweet face oft hides a sinner's heart."

Lord Merryweather spoke up from the council table. "What offense have these young maids been accused of, and by whom?"

The septa said, "Megga Tyrell and Elinor Tyrell stand accused of lewdness, fornication, and conspiracy to commit high treason. Alla Tyrell has been charged with witnessing their shame and helping them conceal it. All this Queen Margaery has also been accused of, as well as adultery and high treason."

Cersei put a hand to her breast. “Tell me who is spreading such calumnies about my good-daughter! I do not believe a word of this. My sweet son loves Lady Margaery with all his heart, she could never have been so cruel as to play him false.”

“The accuser is a knight of your own household. Ser Osney Kettleblack has confessed his carnal knowledge of the queen to the High Septon himself, before the altar of the Father.”

At the council table Harys Swyft gasped, and Grand Maester Pycelle turned away. A buzz filled the air, as if a thousand wasps were loose in the throne room. Some of the ladies in the galleries began to slip away, followed by a stream of petty lords and knights from the back of the hall. The gold cloaks let them go, but the queen had instructed Ser Osfryd to make note of all who fled. *Suddenly the Tyrell rose does not smell so sweet.*

“Ser Osney is young and lusty, I will grant you,” the queen said, “but a faithful knight for all that. If he says that he was part of this... no, it cannot be. Margaery is a maiden!”

“She is not. I examined her myself, at the behest of His High Holiness. Her maidenhead is not intact. Septa Aglantine and Septa Melicent will say the same, as will Queen Margaery’s own septa, Nysterica, who has been confined to a penitent’s cell for her part in the queen’s shame. Lady Megga and Lady Elinor were examined as well. Both were found to have been broken.”

The wasps were growing so loud that the queen could hardly hear herself think. *I do hope the little queen and her cousins enjoyed those rides of theirs.*

Lord Merryweather thumped his fist on the table. “Lady Margaery had sworn solemn oaths attesting to her maidenhood, to Her Grace the queen and her late father. Many here bore witness. Lord Tyrell has also testified to her innocence, as has the Lady Olenna, whom we all know to be above reproach. Would you have us believe that all of these noble people *lied* to us?”

“Perhaps they were deceived as well, my lord,” said Septa Moelle. “I cannot speak to this. I can only swear to the truth of what I discovered for

myself when I examined the queen.”

The picture of this sour old crone poking her wrinkled fingers up Margaery’s little pink cunt was so droll that Cersei almost laughed. “We insist that His High Holiness allow our own maesters to examine my good-daughter, to determine if there is any shred of truth to these slanders. Grand Maester Pycelle, you shall accompany Septa Moelle back to Beloved Baelor’s Sept, and return to us with the truth about our Margaery’s maidenhead.”

Pycelle had gone the color of curdled white. At council meetings the wretched old fool cannot say enough, but now that I need a few words from him he has lost the power of speech, the queen thought, before the old man finally came out with, “There is no need for me to examine her... her privy parts.” His voice was a quaver. “I grieve to say... Queen Margaery is no maiden. She has required me to make her moon tea, not once, but many times.”

The uproar that followed that was all that Cersei Lannister could ever have hoped for.

Even the royal herald beating on the floor with his staff did little to quell the noise. The queen let it wash over her for a few heartbeats, savoring the sounds of the little queen’s disgrace. When it had gone on long enough, she rose stone-faced and commanded that the gold cloaks clear the hall. *Margaery Tyrell is done*, she thought, exulting. Her white knights fell in around her as she made her exit through the king’s door behind the Iron Throne; Boros Blount, Meryn Trant, and Osmund Kettleblack, the last of the Kingsguard still remaining in the city.

Moon Boy was standing beside the door, holding his rattle in his hand and gaping at the confusion with his big round eyes. A fool he may be, but he wears his folly honestly. Maggy the Frog should have been in motley too, for all she knew about the morrow. Cersei prayed the old fraud was screaming down in hell. The younger queen whose coming she’d foretold was finished, and if that prophecy could fail, so could the rest. No golden shrouds, no valonqar, I am free of your croaking malice at last.

The remnants of her small council followed her out. Harys Swyft appeared dazed. He stumbled at the door and might have fallen if Aurane Waters had not caught him by the arm. Even Orton Merryweather seemed anxious. “The smallfolk are fond of the little queen,” he said. “They will not take well to this. I fear what might happen next, Your Grace.”

“Lord Merryweather is right,” said Lord Waters. “If it please Your Grace, I will launch the rest of our new dromonds. The sight of them upon the Blackwater with King Tommen’s banner flying from their masts will remind the city who rules here, and keep them safe should the mobs decide to run riot again.”

He left the rest unspoken; once on the Blackwater, his dromonds could stop Mace Tyrell from bringing his army back across the river, just as Tyrion had once stopped Stannis. Highgarden had no sea power of its own this side of Westeros. They relied upon the Redwyne fleet, presently on its way back to the Arbor.

“A prudent measure,” the queen announced. “Until this storm has passed, I want your ships crewed and on the water.”

Ser Harys Swyft was so pale and damp he looked about to faint. “When word of this reaches Lord Tyrell, his fury will know no bounds. There will be blood in the streets...”

The knight of the yellow chicken, Cersei mused. You ought to take a worm for your sigil, ser. A chicken is too bold for you. If Mace Tyrell will not even assault Storm’s End, how do you imagine that he would ever dare attack the gods? When he was done blathering she said, “It must not come to blood, and I mean to see that it does not. I will go to Baelor’s Sept myself to speak to Queen Margaery and the High Septon. Tommen loves them both, I know, and would want me to make peace between them.”

“Peace?” Ser Harys dabbed at his brow with a velvet sleeve. “If peace is possible... that is very brave of you.”

“Some sort of trial may be necessary,” said the queen, “to disprove these base calumnies and lies and show the world that our sweet Margaery is the innocent we all know her to be.”

“Aye,” said Merryweather, “but this High Septon may want to try the queen himself, as the Faith once tried men of old.”

I hope so, Cersei thought. Such a court was not like to look with favor on treasonous queens who spread their legs for singers and profaned the Maiden’s holy rites to hide their shame. “The important thing is to find the truth, I am sure we all agree,” she said. “And now, my lords, you must excuse me. I must go see the king. He should not be alone at such a time.”

Tommen was fishing for cats when his mother returned to him. Dorcas had made him a mouse with scraps of fur and tied it on a long string at the end of an old fishing pole. The kittens loved to chase it, and the boy liked nothing better than jerking it about the floor as they pounced after it. He seemed surprised when Cersei gathered him up in her arms and kissed him on his brow. “What’s that for, Mother? Why are you crying?”

Because you’re safe, she wanted to tell him. *Because no harm will ever come to you*. “You are mistaken. A lion never cries.” There would be time later to tell him about Margaery and her cousins. “There are some warrants that I need you to sign.”

For the king’s sake, the queen had left the names off the arrest warrants. Tommen signed them blank, and pressed his seal into the warm wax happily, as he always did. Afterward she sent him off with Jocelyn Swyft.

Ser Osfryd Kettleblack arrived as the ink was drying. Cersei had written in the names herself: Ser Tallad the Tall, Jalabhar Xho, Hamish the Harper, Hugh Clifton, Mark Mullendore, Bayard Norcross, Lambert Turnberry, Horas Redwyne, Hobber Redwyne, and a certain churl named Wat, who called himself the Blue Bard.

“So many.” Ser Osfryd shuffled through the warrants, as wary of the words as if they had been roaches crawling across the parchment. None of the Kettleblacks could read.

“Ten. You have six thousand gold cloaks. Sufficient for ten, I would think. Some of the clever ones may have fled, if the rumors reached their ears in time. If so, it makes no matter, their absence only makes them look that much more guilty. Ser Tallad is a bit of an oaf and may try to resist you. See that he does not die before confessing, and do no harm to any of the

others. A few may well be innocent.” It was important that the Redwyne twins be found to have been falsely accused. That would demonstrate the fairness of the judgments against the others.

“We’ll have them all before the sun comes up, Your Grace.” Ser Osfryd hesitated. “There’s a crowd gathering outside the door of Baelor’s Sept.”

“What sort of crowd?” Anything unexpected made her wary. She remembered what Lord Waters had said about the riots. *I had not considered how the smallfolk might react to this. Margaery has been their little pet.* “How many?”

“A hundred or so. They’re shouting for the High Septon to release the little queen. We can send them running, if you like.”

“No. Let them shout until they’re hoarse, it will not sway the Sparrow. He only listens to the gods.” There was a certain irony in His High Holiness having an angry mob encamped upon his doorstep, since just such a mob had raised him to the crystal crown. *Which he promptly sold.* “The Faith has its own knights now. Let them defend the sept. Oh, and close the city gates as well. No one is to enter or leave King’s Landing without my leave, until all this is done and settled.”

“As you command, Your Grace.” Ser Osfryd bowed and went off to find someone to read the warrants to him.

By the time the sun went down that day, all of the accused traitors were in custody. Hamish the Harper had collapsed when they came for him, and Ser Tallad the Tall had wounded three gold cloaks before the others overwhelmed him. Cersei ordered that the Redwyne twins be given comfortable chambers in a tower. The rest went down to the dungeons.

“Hamish is having difficulty breathing,” Qyburn informed her when he came to call that night. “He is calling for a maester.”

“Tell him he can have one as soon as he confesses.” She thought a moment. “He is too old to have been amongst the lovers, but no doubt he was made to play and sing for Margaery whilst she was entertaining other men. We will need details.”

“I shall help him to remember them, Your Grace.”

The next day, Lady Merryweather helped Cersei dress for their visit to the little queen. “Nothing too rich or colorful,” she said. “Something suitably devout and drab for the High Septon. He’s like to make me pray with him.”

In the end, she chose a soft woolen dress that covered her from throat to ankle, with only a few small vines embroidered on the bodice and the sleeves in golden thread to soften the severity of its lines. Even better, brown would help conceal the dirt if she was made to kneel. “Whilst I am comforting my good-daughter you shall speak with the three cousins,” she told Taena. “Win Alla if you can, but be careful what you say. The gods may not be the only ones listening.”

Jaime always said that the hardest part of any battle is just before, waiting for the carnage to begin. When she stepped outside, Cersei saw that the sky was grey and bleak. She could not take the risk of being caught in a downpour and arriving at Baelor’s Sept soaked and bedraggled. That meant the litter. For her escort, she took ten Lannister house guards and Boros Blount. “Margaery’s mob may not have the wit to tell one Kettleblack from another,” she told Ser Osmund, “and I cannot have you cutting through the commons. Best we keep you out of sight for a time.”

As they made their way across King’s Landing, Taena had a sudden doubt. “This trial,” she said, in a quiet voice, “what if Margaery demands that her guilt or innocence be determined by wager of battle?”

A smile brushed Cersei’s lips. “As queen, her honor must be defended by a knight of the Kingsguard. Why, every child in Westeros knows how Prince Aemon the Dragonknight championed his sister Queen Naerys against Ser Morghil’s accusations. With Ser Loras so gravely wounded, though, I fear Prince Aemon’s part must fall to one of his Sworn Brothers.” She shrugged. “Who, though? Ser Arys and Ser Balon are far away in Dorne, Jaime is off at Riverrun, and Ser Osmund is the brother of the man accusing her, which leaves only... oh, dear...”

“Boros Blount and Meryn Trant.” Lady Taena laughed.

“Yes, and Ser Meryn has been feeling ill of late. Remind me to tell him that when we return to the castle.”

“I shall, my sweet.” Taena took her hand and kissed it. “I pray that I never offend you. You are terrible when roused.”

“Any mother would do the same to protect her children,” said Cersei. “When do you mean to bring that boy of yours to court? Russell, was that his name? He could train with Tommen.”

“That would thrill the boy, I know... but things are so uncertain just now, I thought it best to wait until the danger passed.”

“Soon enough,” promised Cersei. “Send word to Longtable and have Russell pack his best doublet and his wooden sword. A new young friend will be just the thing to help Tommen forget his loss, after Margaery’s little head has rolled.”

They descended from the litter under Blessed Baelor’s statue. The queen was pleased to see that the bones and filth had been cleaned away. Ser Osfryd had told it true; the crowd was neither as numerous nor as unruly as the sparrows had been. They stood about in small clumps, gazing sullenly at the doors of the Great Sept, where a line of novice septons had been drawn up with quarterstaffs in their hands. *No steel*, Cersei noted. That was either very wise or very stupid, she was not sure which.

No one made any attempt to hinder her. Smallfolk and novices alike parted as they passed. Once inside the doors, they were met by three knights in the Hall of Lamps, each clad in the rainbow-striped robes of the Warrior’s Sons. “I am here to see my good-daughter,” Cersei told them.

“His High Holiness has been expecting you. I am Ser Theodan the True, formerly Ser Theodan Wells. If Your Grace will come with me.”

The High Sparrow was on his knees, as ever. This time he was praying before the Father’s altar. Nor did he break off his prayer when the queen approached, but made her wait impatiently until he had finished. Only then did he rise and bow to her. “Your Grace. This is a sad day.”

“Very sad. Do we have your leave to speak with Margaery and her cousins?” She chose a meek and humble manner; with this man, that was like to work the best.

“If that is your wish. Come to me afterward, my child. We must pray together, you and I.”

The little queen had been confined atop one of the Great Sept’s slender towers. Her cell was eight feet long and six feet wide, with no furnishings but a straw-stuffed pallet and a bench for prayer, a ewer of water, a copy of *The Seven-Pointed Star*, and a candle to read it by. The only window was hardly wider than an arrow slit.

Cersei found Margaery barefoot and shivering, clad in the roughspun shift of a novice sister. Her locks were all a tangle, and her feet were filthy. “They took my *clothes* from me,” the little queen told her once they were alone. “I wore a gown of ivory lace, with freshwater pearls on the bodice, but the septas laid their *hands* on me and stripped me to the skin. My cousins too. Megga sent one septa crashing into the candles and set her robe afire. I fear for Alla, though. She went as white as milk, too frightened even to cry.”

“Poor child.” There were no chairs, so Cersei sat beside the little queen on her pallet. “Lady Taena has gone to speak with her, to let her know that she is not forgotten.”

“He will not even let me see them,” fumed Margaery. “He keeps each of us apart from the others. Until you came, I was allowed no visitors but septas. One comes every hour to ask if I wish to confess my fornications. They will not even let me sleep. They wake me to demand confessions. Last night I confessed to Septa Unella that I wished to scratch her eyes out.”

A shame you did not do it, Cersei thought. Blinding some poor old septa would certainly persuade the High Sparrow of your guilt. “They are questioning your cousins the same way.”

“Damn them, then,” said Margaery. “Damn them all to seven hells. Alla is gentle and shy, how can they do this to her? And Megga... she laughs as loud as a dockside whore, I know, but inside she’s still just a little girl. I love them all, and they love me. If this sparrow thinks to make them lie about me...”

“They stand accused as well, I fear. All three.”

“My *cousins*?” Margaery paled. “Alla and Megga are hardly more than children. Your Grace, this... this is obscene. Will you take us out of here?”

“Would that I could.” Her voice was full of sorrow. “His High Holiness has his new knights guarding you. To free you I would need to send the gold cloaks and profane this holy place with killing.” Cersei took Margaery’s hand in hers. “I have not been idle, though. I have gathered up all those that Ser Osney named as your lovers. They will tell His High Holiness of your innocence, I am certain, and swear to it at your trial.”

“Trial?” There was real fear in the girl’s voice now. “Must there be a trial?”

“How else will you prove your innocence?” Cersei gave Margaery’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “It is your right to decide the manner of the trial, to be sure. You are the queen. The knights of the Kingsguard are sworn to defend you.”

Margaery understood at once. “A trial by battle? Loras is hurt, though, otherwise he...”

“He has six brothers.”

Margaery stared at her, then pulled her hand away. “Is that a jape? Boros is a craven, Meryn is old and slow, your brother is maimed, the other two are off in Dorne, and Osmund is a bloody *Kettleblack*. Loras has *two* brothers, not six. If there’s to be a trial by battle, I want Garlan as my champion.”

“Ser Garlan is not a member of the Kingsguard,” the queen said. “When the queen’s honor is at issue, law and custom require that her champion be one of the king’s sworn seven. The High Septon will insist, I fear.” *I will make certain of it.*

Margaery did not answer at once, but her brown eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Blount or Trant,” she said at last. “It would have to be one of them. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Osney Kettleblack would cut either one to pieces.”

Seven hells. Cersei donned a look of hurt. “You wrong me, daughter. All I want—”

“—is your son, all for yourself. He will never have a wife that you don’t hate. And I am *not* your daughter, thank the gods. Leave me.”

“You are being foolish. I am only here to help you.”

“To help me to my grave. I asked for you to leave. Will you make me call my gaolers and have you dragged away, you vile, scheming, evil bitch?”

Cersei gathered up her skirts and dignity. “This must be very frightening for you. I shall forgive those words.” Here, as at court, one never knew who might be listening. “I would be afraid as well, in your place. Grand Maester Pycelle has admitted providing you with moon tea, and your Blue Bard... if I were you, my lady, I would pray to the Crone for wisdom and to the Mother for her mercy. I fear you may soon be in dire need of both.”

Four shriveled septas escorted the queen down the tower steps. Each of the crones seemed more feeble than the last. When they reached the ground they continued down, into the heart of Visenya’s Hill. The steps ended well below the earth, where a line of flickering torches lit a long hallway.

She found the High Septon waiting for her in a small seven-sided audience chamber. The room was sparse and plain, with bare stone walls, a rough-hewn table, three chairs, and a prayer bench. The faces of the Seven had been carved into the walls. Cersei thought the carvings crude and ugly, but there was a certain power to them, especially about the eyes, orbs of onyx, malachite, and yellow moonstone that somehow made the faces come alive.

“You spoke with the queen,” the High Septon said.

She resisted the urge to say, *I am the queen*. “I did.”

“All men sin, even kings and queens. I have sinned myself, and been forgiven. Without confession, though, there can be no forgiveness. The queen will not confess.”

“Perhaps she is innocent.”

“She is not. Holy septas have examined her, and testify that her maidenhead is broken. She has drunk of moon tea, to murder the fruit of her

fornications in her womb. An anointed knight has sworn upon his sword to having carnal knowledge of her and two of her three cousins. Others have lain with her as well, he says, and names many names of men both great and humble.”

“My gold cloaks have taken all of them to the dungeons,” Cersei assured him. “Only one has yet been questioned, a singer called the Blue Bard. What he had to say was disturbing. Even so, I pray that when my good-daughter is brought to trial, her innocence may yet be proved.” She hesitated. “Tommen loves his little queen so much, Your Holiness, I fear it might be hard for him or his lords to judge her justly. Perhaps the Faith should conduct the trial?”

The High Sparrow steeped his thin hands. “I have had the selfsame thought, Your Grace. Just as Maegor the Cruel once took the swords from the Faith, so Jaehaerys the Conciliator deprived us of the scales of judgment. Yet who is truly fit to judge a queen, save the Seven Above and the godsworn below? A sacred court of seven judges shall sit upon this case. Three shall be of your female sex. A maiden, a mother, and a crone. Who could be more suited to judge the wickedness of women?”

“That would be for the best. To be sure, Margaery does have the right to demand that her guilt or innocence be proven by wager of battle. If so, her champion must be one of Tommen’s Seven.”

“The knights of the Kingsguard have served as the rightful champions of king and queen since the days of Aegon the Conqueror. Crown and Faith speak as one on this.”

Cersei covered her face with her hands, as if in grief. When she raised her head again, a tear glistened in one eye. “These are sad days indeed,” she said, “but I am pleased to find us so much in agreement. If Tommen were here I know he would thank you. Together you and I must find the truth.”

“We shall.”

“I must return to the castle. With your leave, I will take Ser Osney Kettleblack back with me. The small council will want to question him, and hear his accusations for themselves.”

“No,” said the High Septon.

It was only a word, one little word, but to Cersei it felt like a splash of icy water in the face. She blinked, and her certainty flickered, just a little.

“Ser Osney will be held securely, I promise you.”

“He is held securely here. Come. I will show you.”

Cersei could feel the eyes of the Seven staring at her, eyes of jade and malachite and onyx, and a sudden shiver of fear went through her, cold as ice. *I am the queen*, she told herself. *Lord Tywin’s daughter*. Reluctantly, she followed.

Ser Osney was not far. The chamber was dark, and closed by a heavy iron door. The High Septon produced the key to open it, and took a torch down from the wall to light the room within. “After you, Your Grace.”

Within, Osney Kettleblack hung naked from the ceiling, swinging from a pair of heavy iron chains. He had been whipped. His back and shoulders been laid almost bare, and cuts and welts crisscrossed his legs and arse as well.

The queen could hardly stand to look at him. She turned back to the High Septon. “What have you *done*?”

“We have sought after the truth, most earnestly.”

“He told you the truth. He came to you of his own free will and confessed his sins.”

“Aye. He did that. I have heard many men confess, Your Grace, but seldom have I heard a man so pleased to be so guilty.”

“You *whipped* him!”

“There can be no penance without pain. No man should spare himself the scourge, as I told Ser Osney. I seldom feel so close to god as when I am being whipped for mine own wickedness, though my darkest sins are no wise near as black as his.”

“B-but,” she sputtered, “you preach the Mother’s mercy...”

“Ser Osney shall taste of that sweet milk in the afterlife. In *The Seven-Pointed Star* it is written that all sins may be forgiven, but crimes must still

be punished. Osney Kettleblack is guilty of treason and murder, and the wages of treason are death.”

He is just a priest, he cannot do this. “It is not for the Faith to condemn a man to death, whatever his offense.”

“Whatever his offense.” The High Septon repeated the words slowly, weighing them. “Strange to say, Your Grace, the more diligently we applied the scourge, the more Ser Osney’s offenses seemed to change. He would now have us believe that he never touched Margaery Tyrell. Is that not so, Ser Osney?”

Osney Kettleblack opened his eyes. When he saw the queen standing there before him he ran his tongue across his swollen lips, and said, “The Wall. You promised me the Wall.”

“He is mad,” said Cersei. “You have driven him mad.”

“Ser Osney,” said the High Septon, in a firm, clear voice, “did you have carnal knowledge of the queen?”

“Aye.” The chains rattled softly as Osney twisted in his shackles. “That one there. She’s the queen I fucked, the one sent me to kill the old High Septon. He never had no guards. I just come in when he was sleeping and pushed a pillow down across his face.”

Cersei whirled, and ran.

The High Septon tried to seize her, but he was some old sparrow and she was a lioness of the Rock. She pushed him aside and burst through the door, slamming it behind her with a *clang*. *The Kettleblacks, I need the Kettleblacks, I will send in Osfryd with the gold cloaks and Osmund with the Kingsguard, Osney will deny it all once they cut him free, and I’ll rid myself of this High Septon just as I did the other.* The four old septas blocked her way and clutched at her with wrinkled hands. She knocked one to the floor and clawed another across the face, and gained the steps. Halfway up, she remembered Taena Merryweather. It made her stumble, panting. *Seven save me*, she prayed. *Taena knows it all. If they take her too, and whip her...*

She ran as far as the sept, but no farther. There were women waiting for her there, more septas and silent sisters too, younger than the four old crones below. "I am the *queen*," she shouted, backing away from them. "I will have your heads for this, I will have all your heads. Let me pass." Instead, they laid hands upon her. Cersei ran to the altar of the Mother, but they caught her there, a score of them, and dragged her kicking up the tower steps. Inside the cell three silent sisters held her down as a septa named Scolera stripped her bare. She even took her smallclothes. Another septa tossed a roughspun shift at her. "You cannot do this," the queen kept screaming at them. "I am a Lannister, unhand me, my brother will kill you, Jaime will slice you open from throat to cunt, *unhand me!* I am *the queen!*"

"The queen should pray," said Septa Scolera, before they left her naked in the cold bleak cell.

She was not meek Margaery Tyrell, to don her little shift and submit to such captivity. *I will teach them what it means to put a lion in a cage*, Cersei thought. She tore the shift into a hundred pieces, found a ewer of water and smashed it against the wall, then did the same with the chamber pot. When no one came, she began to pound on the door with her fists. Her escort was below, on the plaza: ten Lannister guardsmen and Ser Boros Blount. *Once they hear they'll come free me, and we'll drag the bloody High Sparrow back to the Red Keep in chains.*

She screamed and kicked and howled until her throat was raw, at the door and at the window. No one shouted back, nor came to rescue her. The cell began to darken. It was growing cold as well. Cersei began to shiver. *How can they leave me like this, without so much as a fire? I am their queen.* She began to regret tearing apart the shift they'd given her. There was a blanket on the pallet in the corner, a threadbare thing of thin brown wool. It was rough and scratchy, but it was all she had. Cersei huddled underneath to keep from shivering, and before long she had fallen into an exhausted sleep.

The next she knew, a heavy hand was shaking her awake. It was black as pitch inside the cell, and a huge ugly woman was kneeling over her, a

candle in her hand. "Who are you?" the queen demanded. "Are you come to set me free?"

"I am Septa Unella. I am come to hear you tell of all your murders and fornications."

Cersei knocked her hand aside. "I will have your head. Do not presume to touch me. Get away."

The woman rose. "Your Grace. I will be back in an hour. Mayhaps by then you will be ready to confess."

An hour and an hour and an hour. So passed the longest night that Cersei Lannister had ever known, save for the night of Joffrey's wedding. Her throat was so raw from shouting that she could hardly swallow. The cell turned freezing cold. She had smashed the chamber pot, so she had to squat in a corner to make her water and watch it trickle across the floor. Every time she closed her eyes, Unella was looming over her again, shaking her and asking her if she wanted to confess her sins.

Day brought no relief. Septa Moelle brought her a bowl of some waterly grey gruel as the sun was coming up. Cersei flung it at her head. When they brought a fresh ewer of water, though, she was so thirsty that she had no choice but to drink. When they brought another shift, grey and thin and smelling of mildew, she put it on over her nakedness. And that evening when Moelle appeared again she ate the bread and fish and demanded wine to wash it down. No wine appeared, only Septa Unella, making her hourly visit to ask if the queen was ready to confess.

What can be happening? Cersei wondered, as the thin slice of sky outside her window began to darken once again. *Why has no one come to pry me out of here?* She could not believe that the Kettleblacks would abandon their brother. What was her council doing? *Cravens and traitors. When I get out of here I will have the lot of them beheaded and find better men to take their place.*

Thrice that day she heard the sound of distant shouting drifting up from the plaza, but it was Margaery's name that the mob was calling, not hers.

It was near dawn on the second day and Cersei was licking the last of the porridge from the bottom of the bowl when her cell door swung open unexpectedly to admit Lord Qyburn. It was all she could do not to throw herself at him. “Qyburn,” she whispered, “oh, gods, I am so glad to see your face. Take me home.”

“That will not be allowed. You are to be tried before a holy court of seven, for murder, treason, and fornication.”

Cersei was so exhausted that the words seemed nonsensical to her at first. “Tommen. Tell me of my son. Is he still king?”

“He is, Your Grace. He is safe and well, secure within the walls of Maegor’s Holdfast, protected by the Kingsguard. He is lonely, though. Fretful. He asks for you, and for his little queen. As yet, no one has told him of your... your...”

“...difficulties?” she suggested. “What of Margaery?”

“She is to be tried as well, by the same court that conducts your trial. I had the Blue Bard delivered to the High Septon, as Your Grace commanded. He is here now, somewhere down below us. My whisperers tell me that they are whipping him, but so far he is still singing the same sweet song we taught him.”

The same sweet song. Her wits were dull for want of sleep. *Wat, his real name is Wat.* If the gods were good, Wat might die beneath the lash, leaving Margaery with no way to disprove his testimony. “Where are my knights? Ser Osfryd... the High Septon means to kill his brother Osney, his gold cloaks must...”

“Osfryd Kettleblack no longer commands the City Watch. The king has removed him from office and raised the captain of the Dragon Gate in his place, a certain Humfrey Waters.”

Cersei was so tired, none of this made any sense. “Why would Tommen do that?”

“The boy is not to blame. When his council puts a decree in front of him, he signs his name and stamps it with his seal.”

“*My* council... who? Who would do that? Not you?”

“Alas, I have been dismissed from the council, although for the nonce they allow me to continue my work with the eunuch’s whisperers. The realm is being ruled by Ser Harys Swyft and Grand Maester Pycelle. They have dispatched a raven to Casterly Rock, inviting your uncle to return to court and assume the regency. If he means to accept, he had best make haste. Mace Tyrell has abandoned his siege of Storm’s End and is marching back to the city with his army, and Randyll Tarly is reported on his way down from Maidenpool as well.”

“Has Lord Merryweather agreed to this?”

“Merryweather has resigned his seat on the council and fled back to Longtable with his wife, who was the first to bring us news of the... accusations... against Your Grace.”

“They let Taena go.” That was the best thing she had heard since the High Sparrow had said *no*. Taena could have doomed her. “What of Lord Waters? His ships... if he brings his crews ashore, he should have enough men to...”

“As soon as word of Your Grace’s present troubles reached the river, Lord Waters raised sail, unshipped his oars, and took his fleet to sea. Ser Harys fears he means to join Lord Stannis. Pycelle believes that he is sailing to the Stepstones, to set himself up as a pirate.”

“All my lovely dromonds.” Cersei almost laughed. “My lord father used to say that bastards are treacherous by nature. Would that I had listened.” She shivered. “I am lost, Qyburn.”

“No.” He took her hand. “Hope remains. Your Grace has the right to prove your innocence by battle. My queen, your champion stands ready. There is no man in all the Seven Kingdoms who can hope to stand against him. If you will only give the command...”

This time she did laugh. It was funny, terribly funny, *hideously* funny. “The gods make japes of all our hopes and plans. I have a champion no man can defeat, but I am forbidden to make use of him. I am the *queen*, Qyburn. My honor can only be defended by a Sworn Brother of the Kingsguard.”

“I see.” The smile died on Qyburn’s face. “Your Grace, I am at a loss. I do not know how to counsel you...”

Even in her exhausted, frightened state, the queen knew she dare not trust her fate to a court of sparrows. Nor could she count on Ser Kevan to intervene, after the words that had passed between them at their last meeting. *It will have to be a trial by battle. There is no other way.* “Qyburn, for the love you bear me, I beg you, send a message for me. A raven if you can. A rider, if not. You must send to Riverrun, to my brother. Tell him what has happened, and write... write...”

“Yes, Your Grace?”

She licked her lips, shivering. “Come at once. Help me. Save me. I need you now as I have never needed you before. I love you. I love you. I love you. *Come at once.*”

“As you command. ‘*I love you*’ thrice?”

“Thrice.” She had to reach him. “He will come. I know he will. He must. Jaime is my only hope.”

“My queen,” said Qyburn, “have you... forgotten? Ser Jaime has no sword hand. If he should champion you and lose...”

We will leave this world together, as we once came into it. “He will not lose. Not Jaime. Not with my life at stake.”