

# CERSEI

On the last night of her imprisonment, the queen could not sleep. Each time she closed her eyes, her head filled with forebodings and fantasies of the morrow. *I will have guards, she told herself. They will keep the crowds away. No one will be allowed to touch me.* The High Sparrow had promised her that much.

Even so, she was afraid. On the day Myrcella sailed for Dorne, the day of the bread riots, gold cloaks had been posted all along the route of the procession, but the mob had broken through their lines to tear the old fat High Septon into pieces and rape Lollys Stokeworth half a hundred times. And if that pale soft stupid creature could incite the animals when fully clothed, how much more lust would a queen inspire?

Cersei paced her cell, restless as the caged lions that had lived in the bowels of Casterly Rock when she was a girl, a legacy of her grandfather's time. She and Jaime used to dare each other to climb into their cage, and once she worked up enough courage to slip her hand between two bars and touch one of the great tawny beasts. She was always bolder than her brother. The lion had turned his head to stare at her with huge golden eyes. Then he licked her fingers. His tongue was as rough as a rasp, but even so she would not pull her hand back, not until Jaime took her by the shoulders and yanked her away from the cage.

"Your turn," she told him afterward. "Pull his mane, I dare you." *He never did. I should have had the sword, not him.*

Barefoot and shivering she paced, a thin blanket draped about her shoulders. She was anxious for the day to come. By evening it would all be done. *A little walk and I'll be home, I'll be back with Tommen, in my own chambers inside Maegor's Holdfast.* Her uncle said it was the only way to save herself. Was it, though? She could not trust her uncle, no more than she trusted this High Septon. *I could still refuse. I could still insist upon my innocence and hazard all upon a trial.*

But she dare not let the Faith sit in judgment on her, as that Margaery Tyrell meant to do. That might serve the little rose well enough, but Cersei had few friends amongst the septas and sparrows around this new High Septon. Her only hope was trial by battle, and for that she must needs have a champion.

*If Jaime had not lost his hand ...*

That road led nowhere, though. Jaime's sword hand was gone, and so was he, vanished with the woman Brienne somewhere in the riverlands. The queen had to find another defender or today's ordeal would be the least of her travails. Her enemies were accusing her of treason. She had to reach Tommen, no matter the costs. *He loves me. He will not refuse his own mother. Joff was stubborn and unpredictable, but Tommen is a good little boy, a good little king. He will do as he is told.* If she stayed here, she was doomed, and the only way she would return to the Red Keep was by walking. The High Sparrow had been adamant, and Ser Kevan refused to lift a finger against him.

"No harm will come to me today," Cersei said when the day's first light brushed her window. "Only my pride will suffer." The words rang hollow in her ears. *Jaime may yet come.* She pictured him riding through the morning mists, his golden armor bright in the light of the rising sun. *Jaime, if you ever loved me ...*

When her gaolers came for her, Septa Unella, Septa Moelle, and Septa Scolera led the procession. With them were four novices and two of the silent sisters. The sight of the silent sisters in their grey robes filled the queen with sudden terrors. *Why are they here? Am I to die?* The silent sisters attended to the dead. "The High Septon promised that no harm would come to me."

"Nor will it." Septa Unella beckoned to the novices. They brought lye soap, a basin of warm water, a pair of shears, and a long straightrazor. The sight of the steel sent a shiver through her. *They mean to shave me. A little more humiliation, a raisin for my porridge.* She would not give them the pleasure of hearing her beg. *I am Cersei of House Lannister, a lion of the Rock, the*

*rightful queen of these Seven Kingdoms, trueborn daughter of Tywin Lannister. And hair grows back.* “Get on with it,” she said.

The elder of the two silent sisters took up the shears. A practiced barber, no doubt; her order often cleaned the corpses of the noble slain before returning them to their kin, and trimming beards and cutting hair was part of that. The woman bared the queen’s head first. Cersei sat as still as a stone statue as the shears clicked. Drifts of golden hair fell to the floor. She had not been allowed to tend it properly penned up in this cell, but even unwashed and tangled it shone where the sun touched it. *My crown*, the queen thought. *They took the other crown away from me, and now they are stealing this one as well.* When her locks and curls were piled up around her feet, one of the novices soaped her head and the silent sister scraped away the stubble with a razor.

Cersei hoped that would be the end of it, but no. “Remove your shift, Your Grace,” Septa Unella commanded.

“Here?” the queen asked. “Why?”

“You must be shorn.”

*Shorn*, she thought, *like a sheep*. She yanked the shift over her head and tossed it to the floor. “Do what you will.”

Then it was the soap again, the warm water, and the razor. The hair beneath her arms went next, then her legs, and last of all the fine golden down that covered her mound. When the silent sister crept between her legs with the razor, Cersei found herself remembering all the times that Jaime had knelt where she was kneeling now, planting kisses on the inside of her thighs, making her wet. His kisses were always warm. The razor was ice-cold.

When the deed was done she was as naked and vulnerable as a woman could be. *Not even a hair to hide behind.* A little laugh burst from her lips, bleak and bitter.

“Does Your Grace find this amusing?” said Septa Scolera. “No, septa,” said Cersei. *But one day I will have your tongue ripped out with hot pincers, and*

*that will be hilarious.*

One of the novices had brought a robe for her, a soft white septa's robe to cover her as she made her way down the tower steps and through the sept, so any worshipers they met along the way might be spared the sight of naked flesh. *Seven save us all, what hypocrites they are.* "Will I be permitted a pair of sandals?" she asked. "The streets are filthy."

"Not so filthy as your sins," said Septa Moelle. "His High Holiness has commanded that you present yourself as the gods made you. Did you have sandals on your feet when you came forth from your lady mother's womb?"

"No, septa," the queen was forced to say. "Then you have your answer."

A bell began to toll. The queen's long imprisonment was at an end. Cersei pulled the robe tighter, grateful for its warmth, and said, "Let us go." Her son awaited her across the city. The sooner she set out, the sooner she would see him.

The rough stone of the steps scraped her soles as Cersei Lannister made her descent. She had come to Baelor's Sept a queen, riding in a litter. She was leaving bald and barefoot. *But I am leaving. That is all that matters.*

The tower bells were singing, summoning the city to bear witness to her shame. The Great Sept of Baelor was crowded with faithful come for the dawn service, the sound of their prayers echoing off the dome overhead, but when the queen's procession made its appearance a sudden silence fell and a thousand eyes turned to follow her as she made her way down the aisle, past the place where her lord father had lain in state after his murder. Cersei swept by them, looking neither right nor left. Her bare feet slapped against the cold marble floor. She could feel the eyes. Behind their altars, the Seven seemed to watch as well.

In the Hall of Lamps, a dozen Warrior's Sons awaited her coming. Rainbow cloaks hung down their backs, and the crystals that crested their greathelms glittered in the lamplight. Their armor was silver plate polished to a mirror sheen, but underneath, she knew, every man of them wore a hair shirt. Their

kite shields all bore the same device: a crystal sword shining in the darkness, the ancient badge of those the smallfolk called Swords.

Their captain knelt before her. “Perhaps Your Grace will recall me. I am Ser Theodan the True, and His High Holiness has given me command of your escort. My brothers and I will see you safely through the city.”

Cersei’s gaze swept across the faces of the men behind him. And there he was: Lancel, her cousin, Ser Kevan’s son, who had once professed to love her, before he decided that he loved the gods more. *My blood and my betrayer.* She would not forget him. “You may rise, Ser Theodan. I am ready.”

The knight stood, turned, raised a hand. Two of his men stepped to the towering doors and pushed them open, and Cersei walked through them into the open air, blinking at the sunlight like a mole roused from its burrow.

A gusty wind was blowing, and it set the bottom of her robe snapping and flapping at her legs. The morning air was thick with the old familiar stinks of King’s Landing. She breathed in the scents of sour wine, bread baking, rotting fish and nightsoil, smoke and sweat and horse piss. No flower had ever smelled so sweet. Huddled in her robe, Cersei paused atop the marble steps as the Warrior’s Sons formed up around her.

It came to her suddenly that she had stood in this very spot before, on the day Lord Eddard Stark had lost his head. *That was not supposed to happen. Joff was supposed to spare his life and send him to the Wall.* Stark’s eldest son would have followed him as Lord of Winterfell, but Sansa would have stayed at court, a hostage. Varys and Littlefinger had worked out the terms, and Ned Stark had swallowed his precious honor and confessed his treason to save his daughter’s empty little head. *I would have made Sansa a good marriage. A Lannister marriage. Not Joff, of course, but Lancel might have suited, or one of his younger brothers.* Petyr Baelish had offered to wed the girl himself, she recalled, but of course that was impossible; he was much too lowborn. *If Joff had only done as he was told, Winterfell would never have gone to war, and Father would have dealt with Robert’s brothers.*

Instead Joff had commanded that Stark's head be struck off, and Lord Slynt and Ser Ilyn Payne had hastened to obey. *It was just there*, the queen recalled, gazing at the spot. Janos Slynt had lifted Ned Stark's head by the hair as his life's blood flowed down the steps, and after that there was no turning back.

The memories seemed so distant. Joffrey was dead, and all Stark's sons as well. Even her father had perished. And here she stood on the steps of the Great Sept again, only this time it was her the mob was staring at, not Eddard Stark.

The wide marble plaza below was as crowded as it had been on the day that Stark had died. Everywhere she looked the queen saw eyes. The mob seemed to be equal parts men and women. Some had children on their shoulders. Beggars and thieves, taverners and tradesfolk, tanners and stableboys and mummers, the poorer sort of whore, all the scum had come out to see a queen brought low. And mingled in with them were the Poor Fellows, filthy, unshaven creatures armed with spears and axes and clad in bits of dented plate, rusted mail, and cracked leather, under roughspun surcoats bleached white and blazoned with the seven-pointed star of the Faith. The High Sparrow's ragged army.

Part of her still yearned for Jaime to appear and rescue her from this humiliation, but her twin was nowhere to be seen. Nor was her uncle present. That did not surprise her. Ser Kevan had made his views plain during his last visit; her shame must not be allowed to tarnish the honor of Casterly Rock. No lions would walk with her today. This ordeal was hers and hers alone.

Septa Unella stood to her right, Septa Moelle to her left, Septa Scolera behind her. If the queen should bolt or balk, the three hags would drag her back inside, and this time they would see to it that she never left her cell.

Cersei raised her head. Beyond the plaza, beyond the sea of hungry eyes and gaping mouths and dirty faces, across the city, Aegon's High Hill rose in the distance, the towers and battlements of the Red Keep blushing pink in the light of the rising sun. *It is not so far*. Once she reached its gates, the worst of her travails would be over. She would have her son again. She

would have her champion. Her uncle had promised her. *Tommen is waiting for me. My little king. I can do this. I must.*

Septa Unella stepped forward. “A sinner comes before you,” she declared. “She is Cersei of House Lannister, queen dowager, mother to His Grace King Tommen, widow of His Grace King Robert, and she has committed grievous falsehoods and fornications.”

Septa Moelle moved up on the queen’s right. “This sinner has confessed her sins and begged for absolution and forgiveness. His High Holiness has commanded her to demonstrate her repentance by putting aside all pride and artifice and presenting herself as the gods made her before the good people of the city.”

Septa Scolera finished. “So now this sinner comes before you with a humble heart, shorn of secrets and concealments, naked before the eyes of gods and men, to make her walk of atonement.”

Cersei had been a year old when her grandfather died. The first thing her father had done on his ascension was to expel his own father’s grasping, lowborn mistress from Casterly Rock. The silks and velvets Lord Tytos had lavished on her and the jewelry she had taken for herself had been stripped from her, and she had been sent forth naked to walk through the streets of Lannisport, so the west could see her for what she was.

Though she had been too young to witness the spectacle herself, Cersei had heard the stories growing up from the mouths of washerwomen and guardsmen who had been there. They spoke of how the woman had wept and begged, of the desperate way she clung to her garments when she was commanded to disrobe, of her futile efforts to cover her breasts and her sex with her hands as she hobbled barefoot and naked through the streets to exile. “Vain and proud she was, before,” she remembered one guard saying, “so haughty you’d think she’d forgot she come from dirt. Once we got her clothes off her, though, she was just another whore.”

If Ser Kevan and the High Sparrow thought that it would be the same with her, they were very much mistaken. Lord Tywin’s blood was in her. *I am a lioness. I will not cringe for them.*

The queen shrugged off her robe.

She bared herself in one smooth, unhurried motion, as if she were back in her own chambers disrobing for her bath with no one but her bedmaids looking on. When the cold wind touched her skin, she shivered violently. It took all her strength of will not to try and hide herself with her hands, as her grandfather's whore had done. Her fingers tightened into fists, her nails digging into her palms. They were looking at her, all the hungry eyes. But what were they seeing? *I am beautiful*, she reminded himself. How many times had Jaime told her that? Even Robert had given her that much, when he came to her bed in his cups to pay her drunken homage with his cock.

*They looked at Ned Stark the same way, though.*

She had to move. Naked, shorn, barefoot, Cersei made a slow descent down the broad marble steps. Gooseprickles rose on her arms and legs. She held her chin high, as a queen should, and her escort fanned out ahead of her. The Poor Fellows shoved men aside to open a way through the crowd whilst the Swords fell in on either side of her. Septa Unella, Septa Scolera, and Septa Moelle followed. Behind them came the novice girls in white.

“*Whore!*” someone cried out. A woman's voice. Women were always the cruelest where other women were concerned.

Cersei ignored her. *There will be more, and worse. These creatures have no sweeter joy in life than jeering at their betters.* She could not silence them, so she must pretend she did not hear them. She would not see them either. She would keep her eyes on Aegon's High Hill across the city, on the towers of the Red Keep shimmering in the light. That was where she would find her salvation, if her uncle had kept his part of their bargain.

*He wanted this. Him and the High Sparrow. And the little rose as well, I do not doubt. I have sinned and must atone, must parade my shame before the eyes of every beggar in the city. They think that this will break my pride, that it will make an end to me, but they are wrong.*

Septa Unella and Septa Moelle kept pace with her, with Septa Scolera scurrying behind, ringing a bell. “*Shame,*” the old hag called, “*shame upon*



*the sinner, shame, shame.*” Somewhere off to the right, another voice sang counterpoint to hers, some baker’s boy shouting, “Meat pies, three pence, hot meat pies here.” The marble underfoot was cold and slick, and Cersei had to step carefully for fear of slipping. Their path took them past the statue of Baelor the Blessed, standing tall and serene upon his plinth, his face a study in benevolence. To look at him, you would never guess what a fool he’d been. The Targaryen dynasty had produced kings both bad and good, but none as beloved as Baelor, that pious gentle septon-king who loved the smallfolk and the gods in equal parts, yet imprisoned his own sisters. It was a wonder that his statue did not crumble at the sight of her bare breasts. Tyrion used to say that King Baelor was terrified of his own cock. Once, she recalled, he had expelled all the whores from King’s Landing. He prayed for them as they were driven from the city gates, the histories said, but would not look at them.

“Harlot,” a voice screamed. Another woman. Something flew out of the crowd. Some rotted vegetable. Brown and oozing, it sailed above her head to splash at the foot of one of the Poor Fellows. *I am not afraid. I am a lioness.* She walked on. “Hot pies,” the baker’s boy was crying. “Getcha hot pies here.” Septa Scolera rang her bell, singing, “*Shame, shame, shame upon the sinner, shame, shame.*” The Poor Fellows went before them, forcing men aside with their shields, walling off a narrow path. Cersei followed where they led, her head held stiffly, her eyes on the far distance. Every step brought the Red Keep nearer. Every step brought her closer to her son and her salvation.

It seemed to take a hundred years to cross the plaza, but finally marble gave way to cobblestones beneath her feet, shops and stables and houses closed in all around them, and they began the descent of Visenya’s Hill.

The going was slower here. The street was steep and narrow, the crowds jammed together tightly. The Poor Fellows shoved at those who blocked the way, trying to move them aside, but there was nowhere to go, and those in the back of the crowd were shoving back. Cersei tried to keep her head up, only to step in something slick and wet that made her slip. She might have fallen, but Septa Unella caught her arm and kept her on her feet. “Your Grace should watch where she sets her feet.”

Cersei wrenched herself free. “Yes, septa,” she said in a meek voice, though she was angry enough to spit. The queen walked on, clad only in gooseprickles and pride. She looked for the Red Keep, but it was hidden now, walled off from her gaze by the tall timbered buildings to either side. “*Shame, shame,*” sang Septa Scolera, her bell clanging. Cersei tried to walk faster, but soon came up against the backs of the Stars in front of her and had to slow her steps again. A man just ahead was selling skewers of roast meat from a cart, and the procession halted as the Poor Fellows moved him out of the way. The meat looked suspiciously like rat to Cersei’s eyes, but the smell of it filled the air, and half the men around them were gnawing away with sticks in hand by the time the street was clear enough for her to resume her trek. “Want some, Your Grace?” one man called out. He was a big, burly brute with pig eyes, a massive gut, and an unkempt black beard that reminded her of Robert. When she looked away in disgust, he flung the skewer at her. It struck her on the leg and tumbled to the street, and the half-cooked meat left a smear of grease and blood down her thigh.

The shouting seemed louder here than on the plaza, perhaps because the mob was so much closer. “Whore” and “sinner” were most common, but “brotherfucker” and “cunt” and “traitor” were flung at her as well, and now and again she heard someone shout out for Stannis or Margaery. The cobbles underfoot were filthy, and there was so little space that the queen could not even walk around the puddles. *No one has ever died of wet feet,* she told herself. She wanted to believe the puddles were just rainwater, though horse piss was just as likely.

More refuse showered down from windows and balconies: half-rotted fruit, pails of beer, eggs that exploded into sulfurous stink when they cracked open on the ground. Then someone flung a dead cat over the Poor Fellows and Warrior’s Sons alike. The carcass hit the cobbles so hard that it burst open, spattering her lower legs with entrails and maggots.

Cersei walked on. *I am blind and deaf, and they are worms,* she told herself. “*Shame, shame,*” the septas sang. “Chestnuts, hot roast chestnuts,” a peddler cried. “Queen Cunt,” a drunkard pronounced solemnly from a balcony above, lifting his cup to her in a mocking toast. “All hail the royal teats!” *Words are wind,* Cersei thought. *Words cannot harm me.*

Halfway down Visenya's Hill the queen fell for the first time, when her foot slipped in something that might have been nightsoil. When Septa Unella pulled her up, her knee was scraped and bloody. A ragged laugh rippled through the crowd, and some man shouted out an offer to kiss it and make it better. Cersei looked behind her. She could still see the great dome and seven crystal towers of the Great Sept of Baelor atop the hill. *Have I really come such a little way?* Worse, a hundred times worse, she had lost sight of the Red Keep. "Where ... where ... ?"

"Your Grace." The captain of her escort stepped up beside her. Cersei had forgotten his name. "You must continue. The crowd is growing unruly."

Yes, she thought. *Unruly*. "I am not afraid—"

"You should be." He yanked at her arm, pulling her along beside him. She staggered down the hill—downward, ever downward—wincing with every step, letting him support her. *It should be Jaime beside me*. He would draw his golden sword and slash a path right through the mob, carving the eyes out of the head of every man who dared to look at her.

The paving stones were cracked and uneven, slippery underfoot, and rough against her soft feet. Her heel came down on something sharp, a stone or piece of broken crockery. Cersei cried out in pain. "I asked for sandals," she spat at Septa Unella. "You could have given me sandals, you could have done that much." The knight wrenched at her arm again, as if she were some common serving wench. *Has he forgotten who I am?* She was the queen of Westeros; he had no right to lay rough hands on her.

Near the bottom of the hill, the slope gentled and the street began to widen. Cersei could see the Red Keep again, shining crimson in the morning sun atop Aegon's High Hill. *I must keep walking*. She wrenched free of Ser Theodan's grasp. "You do not need to drag me, ser." She limped on, leaving a trail of bloody footprints on the stones behind her.

She walked through mud and dung, bleeding, goosefleshed, hobbling. All around her was a babble of sound. "My wife has sweeter teats than those," a man shouted. A teamster cursed as the Poor Fellows ordered his wagon out of the way. "*Shame, shame, shame on the sinner,*" chanted the septas. "Look

at this one,” a whore called from a brothel window, lifting her skirts to the men below, “it’s not had half as many cocks up it as hers.” Bells were ringing, ringing, ringing. “That can’t be the queen,” a boy said, “she’s saggy as my mum.” *This is my penance*, Cersei told herself. *I have sinned most grievously, this is my atonement. It will be over soon, it will be behind me, then I can forget.*

The queen began to see familiar faces. A bald man with bushy side-whiskers frowned down from a window with her father’s frown, and for an instant looked so much like Lord Tywin that she stumbled. A young girl sat beneath a fountain, drenched in spray, and stared at her with Melara Hetherspoon’s accusing eyes. She saw Ned Stark, and beside him little Sansa with her auburn hair and a shaggy grey dog that might have been her wolf. Every child squirming through the crowd became her brother Tyrion, jeering at her as he had jeered when Joffrey died. And there was Joff as well, her son, her firstborn, her beautiful bright boy with his golden curls and his sweet smile, he had such lovely lips, he ...

That was when she fell the second time.

She was shaking like a leaf when they pulled her to her feet. “Please,” she said. “Mother have mercy. I confessed.”

“You did,” said Septa Moelle. “This is your atonement.”

“It is not much farther,” said Septa Unella. “See?” She pointed. “Up the hill, that’s all.”

*Up the hill. That’s all.* It was true. They were at the foot of Aegon’s High Hill, the castle above them.

“Whore,” someone screamed. “Brotherfucker,” another voice added. “Abomination.”

“Want a suck on this, Your Grace?” A man in a butcher’s apron pulled his cock out of his breeches, grinning. It did not matter. She was almost home.

Cersei began to climb.

If anything, the jeers and shouts were cruder here. Her walk had not taken her through Flea Bottom, so its denizens had packed onto the lower slopes of Aegon's High Hill to see the show. The faces leering out at her from behind the shields and spears of the Poor Fellows seemed twisted, monstrous, hideous. Pigs and naked children were everywhere underfoot, crippled beggars and cutpurses swarmed like roaches through the press. She saw men whose teeth had been filed into points, hags with goiters as big as their heads, a whore with a huge striped snake draped about breasts and shoulders, a man whose cheeks and brow were covered with open sores that wept grey pus. They grinned and licked their lips and hooted at her as she went limping past, her breasts heaving with the effort of the climb. Some shouted obscene proposals, others insults. *Words are wind, she thought, words cannot hurt me. I am beautiful, the most beautiful woman in all Westeros, Jaime says so, Jaime would never lie to me. Even Robert, Robert never loved me, but he saw that I was beautiful, he wanted me.*

She did not feel beautiful, though. She felt old, used, filthy, ugly. There were stretch marks on her belly from the children she had borne, and her breasts were not as firm as they had been when she was younger. Without a gown to hold them up, they sagged against her chest. *I should not have done this. I was their queen, but now they've seen, they've seen, they've seen. I should never have let them see.* Gowned and crowned, she was a queen. Naked, bloody, limping, she was only a woman, not so very different from their wives, more like their mothers than their pretty little maiden daughters. *What have I done?*

There was something in her eyes, stinging, blurring her sight. She could not cry, she would not cry, the worms must never see her weep. Cersei rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. A gust of cold wind made her shiver violently.

And suddenly the hag was there, standing in the crowd with her pendulous teats and her warty greenish skin, leering with the rest, with malice shining from her crusty yellow eyes. "*Queen you shall be,*" she hissed, "*until there comes another, younger and more beautiful, to cast you down and take all you hold most dear.*"

And then there was no stopping the tears. They burned down the queen's cheeks like acid. Cersei gave a sharp cry, covered her nipples with one arm, slid her other hand down to hide her slit, and began to run, shoving her way past the line of Poor Fellows, crouching as she scrambled crab-legged up the hill. Partway up she stumbled and fell, rose, then fell again ten yards farther on. The next thing she knew she was crawling, scrambling uphill on all fours like a dog as the good folks of King's Landing made way for her, laughing and jeering and applauding her.

Then all at once the crowd parted and seemed to dissolve, and there were the castle gates before her, and a line of spearmen in gilded half-helms and crimson cloaks. Cersei heard the gruff, familiar sound of her uncle growling orders and glimpsed a flash of white to either side as Ser Boros Blount and Ser Meryn Trant strode toward her in their pale plate and snowy cloaks. "My son," she cried. "Where is my son? Where is Tommen?"

"Not here. No son should have to bear witness to his mother's shame." Ser Kevan's voice was harsh. "Cover her up."

Then Jocelyn was bending over her, wrapping her in a soft clean blanket of green wool to cover her nakedness. A shadow fell across them both, blotting out the sun. The queen felt cold steel slide beneath her, a pair of great armored arms lifting her off the ground, lifting her up into the air as easily as she had lifted Joffrey when he was still a babe. *A giant*, thought Cersei, dizzy, as he carried her with great strides toward the gatehouse. She had heard that giants could still be found in the godless wild beyond the Wall. *That is just a tale. Am I dreaming?*

No. Her savior was real. Eight feet tall or maybe taller, with legs as thick around as trees, he had a chest worthy of a plow horse and shoulders that would not disgrace an ox. His armor was plate steel, enameled white and bright as a maiden's hopes, and worn over gilded mail. A greathelm hid his face. From its crest streamed seven silken plumes in the rainbow colors of the Faith. A pair of golden seven-pointed stars clasped his billowing cloak at the shoulders.

*A white cloak.*

Ser Kevan had kept his part of the bargain. Tommen, her precious little boy, had named her champion to the Kingsguard.

Cersei never saw where Qyburn came from, but suddenly he was there beside them, scrambling to keep up with her champion's long strides. "Your Grace," he said, "it is so good to have you back. May I have the honor of presenting our newest member of the Kingsguard? This is Ser Robert Strong."

"Ser Robert," Cersei whispered, as they entered the gates. "If it please Your Grace, Ser Robert has taken a holy vow of silence," Qyburn said. "He has sworn that he will not speak until all of His Grace's enemies are dead and evil has been driven from the realm."

*Yes, thought Cersei Lannister. Oh, yes.*