

## CERSEI

The king was pouting. "I want to sit on the Iron Throne," he told her. "You always let Joff sit up there."

"Joffrey was twelve."

"But I'm the *king*. The throne *belongs* to me."

"Who told you that?" Cersei took a deep breath, so Dorcas could lace her up more tightly. She was a big girl, much stronger than Senelle, though clumsier as well.

Tommen's face turned red. "No one told me."

"*No one?* Is that what you call your lady wife?" The queen could smell Margaery Tyrell all over this rebellion. "If you lie to me, I will have no choice but to send for Pate and have him beaten till he bleeds." Pate was Tommen's whipping boy, as he had been Joffrey's. "Is that what you want?"

"No," the king muttered sullenly.

"Who told you?"

He shuffled his feet. "Lady Margaery." He knew better than to call her *queen* in his mother's hearing.

"That is better. Tommen, I have grave matters to decide, matters that you are far too young to understand. I do not need a silly little boy fidgeting on the throne behind me and distracting me with childish questions. I suppose Margaery thinks you ought to be at my council meetings too?"

"Yes," he admitted. "She says I have to learn to be king."

"When you are older, you can attend as many councils as you wish," Cersei told him. "I promise you, you will soon grow sick of them. Robert used to doze through the sessions." *When he troubled to attend at all.* "He preferred to hunt and hawk, and leave the tedium to old Lord Arryn. Do you remember him?"

"He died of a bellyache."

“So he did, poor man. As you are so eager to learn, perhaps you should learn the names of all the kings of Westeros *and* the Hands who served them. You may recite them to me on the morrow.”

“Yes, Mother,” he said meekly.

“That’s my good boy.” The rule was hers; Cersei did not mean to give it up until Tommen came of age. *I waited, so can he. I waited half my life.* She had played the dutiful daughter, the blushing bride, the pliant wife. She had suffered Robert’s drunken groping, Jaime’s jealousy, Renly’s mockery, Varys with his titters, Stannis endlessly grinding his teeth. She had contended with Jon Arryn, Ned Stark, and her vile, treacherous, murderous dwarf brother, all the while promising herself that one day it would be her turn. *If Margaery Tyrell thinks to cheat me of my hour in the sun, she had bloody well think again.*

Still, it was an ill way to break her fast, and Cersei’s day did not soon improve. She spent the rest of the morning with Lord Gyles and his ledger books, listening to him cough about stars and stags and dragons. After him Lord Waters arrived, to report that the first three dromonds were nearing completion and beg for more gold to finish them in the splendor they deserved. The queen was pleased to grant him his request. Moon Boy capered as she took her midday meal with members of the merchant guilds and listened to them complain about sparrows wandering the streets and sleeping in the squares. *I may need to use the gold cloaks to chase these sparrows from the city,* she was thinking, when Pycelle intruded.

The Grand Maester had been especially querulous in council of late. At the last session he had complained bitterly about the men that Aurane Waters had chosen to captain her new dromonds. Waters meant to give the ships to younger men, whilst Pycelle argued for experience, insisting that the commands should go to those captains who had survived the fires of the Blackwater. “Seasoned men of proven loyalty,” he called them. Cersei called them old, and sided with Lord Waters. “The only thing these captains proved was that they know how to swim,” she’d said. “No mother should outlive her children, and no captain should outlive his ship.” Pycelle had taken the rebuke with ill grace.

He seemed less choleric today, and even managed a sort of tremulous smile. “Your Grace, glad tidings,” he announced. “Wyman Manderly has done as you commanded, and beheaded Lord Stannis’s onion knight.”

“We know this for a certainty?”

“The man’s head and hands have been mounted above the walls of White Harbor. Lord Wyman avows this, and the Freys confirm. They have seen the head there, with an onion in its mouth. And the hands, one marked by his shortened fingers.”

“Very good,” said Cersei. “Send a bird to Manderly and inform him that his son will be returned forthwith, now that he has demonstrated his loyalty.” White Harbor would soon return to the king’s peace, and Roose Bolton and his bastard son were closing in on Moat Cailin from south and north. Once the Moat was theirs, they would join their strength and clear the ironmen out of Torrhen’s Square and Deepwood Motte as well. That should win them the allegiance of Ned Stark’s remaining bannermen when the time came to march against Lord Stannis.

To the south, meanwhile, Mace Tyrell had raised a city of tents outside Storm’s End and had two dozen mangonels flinging stones against the castle’s massive walls, thus far to small effect. *Lord Tyrell the warrior*, the queen mused. *His sigil ought to be a fat man sitting on his arse.*

That afternoon the dour Braavosi envoy turned up for his audience. Cersei had put him off for a fortnight and would have gladly put him off another year, but Lord Gyles claimed he could no longer deal with the man... though the queen was starting to wonder if Gyles was capable of doing *anything* but coughing.

Noho Dimittis, the Braavosi named himself. *An irritating name for an irritating man.* His voice was irritating too. Cersei shifted in her seat as he went on, wondering how long she must endure his hectoring. Behind her loomed the Iron Throne, its barbs and blades throwing twisted shadows across the floor. Only the king or his Hand could sit upon the throne itself. Cersei sat by its foot, in a seat of gilded wood piled with crimson cushions.

When the Braavosi paused for breath, she saw her chance. “This is more properly a matter for our lord treasurer.”

That answer did not please the noble Noho, it would seem. “I have spoken with Lord Gyles six times. He coughs at me and makes excuses, Your Grace, but the gold is not forthcoming.”

“Speak to him a seventh time,” Cersei suggested pleasantly. “The number seven is sacred to our gods.”

“It pleases Your Grace to make a jest, I see.”

“When I make a jest I smile. Do you see me smiling? Do you hear laughter? I assure you, when I make a jest, men laugh.”

“King Robert—”

“—is dead,” she said sharply. “The Iron Bank will have its gold when this rebellion has been put down.”

He had the insolence to scowl at her. “Your Grace—”

“This audience is at an end.” Cersei had suffered quite enough for one day. “Ser Meryn, show the noble Noho Dimittis to the door. Ser Osmund, you may escort me back to my apartments.” Her guests would soon arrive, and she had to bathe and change. Supper promised to be a tedious affair as well. It was hard work to rule a kingdom, much less seven of them.

Ser Osmund Kettleblack fell in beside her on the steps, tall and lean in his Kingsguard whites. When Cersei was certain they were quite alone, she slid her arm through his. “How is your little brother faring, pray?”

Ser Osmund looked uneasy. “Ah... well enough, only...”

“*Only?*” The queen let a hint of anger edge her words. “I must confess, I am running short of patience with dear Osney. It is past time he broke in that little filly. I named him Tommen’s sworn shield so he could spend part of every day in Margaery’s company. He should have plucked the rose by now. Is the little queen blind to his charms?”

“His charms is fine. He’s a Kettleblack, ain’t he? Begging your pardon.” Ser Osmund ran his fingers through his oily black hair. “It’s her that’s the trouble.”

“And why is that?” The queen had begun to nurse doubts about Ser Osney. Perhaps another man would have been more to Margaery’s liking. *Aurane Waters, with that silvery hair, or a big strapping fellow like Ser*

*Tallad.* “Would the maid prefer someone else? Does your brother’s face displease her?”

“She likes his face. She touched his scars two days ago, he told me. ‘What woman gave you these?’ she asked. Osney never said it was a woman, but she knew. Might be someone told her. She’s always touching him when they talk, he says. Straightening the clasp on his cloak, brushing back his hair, and like that. One time at the archery butts she had him show her how to hold a longbow, so he had to put his arms around her. Osney tells her bawdy jests, and she laughs and comes back with ones that are even bawdier. No, she wants him, that’s plain, but...”

“But?” Cersei prompted.

“They are never alone. The king’s with them most all the time, and when he’s not, there’s someone else. Two of her ladies share her bed, different ones every night. Two others bring her breakfast and help her dress. She prays with her septa, reads with her cousin Elinor, sings with her cousin Alla, sews with her cousin Megga. When she’s not off hawking with Janna Fossoway and Merry Crane, she’s playing come-into-my-castle with that little Bulwer girl. She never goes riding but she takes a tail, four or five companions and a dozen guards at least. And there’s always men about her, even in the Maidenvault.”

“Men.” That was something. That had possibilities. “What men are these, pray tell?”

Ser Osmund shrugged. “Singers. She’s a fool for singers and jugglers and such. Knights, come round to moon over her cousins. Ser Tallad’s the worst, Osney says. That big oaf don’t seem to know if it’s Elinor or Alla he wants, but he knows he wants her awful bad. The Redwyne twins come calling too. Slobber brings flowers and fruit, and Horror’s taken up the lute. To hear Osney tell it, you could make a sweeter sound strangling a cat. The Summer Islander’s always underfoot as well.”

“Jalabhar Xho?” Cersei gave a derisive snort. “Begging her for gold and swords to win his homeland back, most like.” Beneath his jewels and feathers, Xho was little more than a wellborn beggar. Robert could have put an end to his importuning for good with one firm “No,” but the notion of

conquering the Summer Isles had appealed to her drunken lout of a husband. No doubt he dreamt of brown-skinned wenches naked beneath feathered cloaks, with nipples black as coal. So instead of “No,” Robert always told Xho, “Next year,” though somehow next year never came.

“I couldn’t say if he was begging, Your Grace,” Ser Osmund answered. “Osney says he’s teaching them the Summer Tongue. Not Osney, the quee—the filly and her cousins.”

“A horse that speaks the Summer Tongue would make a great sensation,” the queen said dryly. “Tell your brother to keep his spurs well honed. I shall find some way for him to mount his filly soon, you may rely on that.”

“I’ll tell him, Your Grace. He’s eager for that ride, don’t think he ain’t. She’s a pretty little thing, that filly.”

It is me he’s eager for, fool, the queen thought. All he wants of Margaery is the lordship between her legs. As fond as she was of Osmund, at times he seemed as slow as Robert. I hope his sword is quicker than his wits. The day may come that Tommen has some need of it.

They were crossing beneath the shadow of the broken Tower of the Hand when the sound of cheers swept over them. Across the yard, some squire had made a pass at the quintain and sent the crossarm spinning. The cheers were being led by Margaery Tyrell and her hens. *A lot of uproar for very little. You would think the boy had won a tourney.* Then she was startled to see that it was Tommen on the courser, clad all in gilded plate.

The queen had little choice but to don a smile and go to see her son. She reached him as the Knight of Flowers was helping him from his horse. The boy was breathless with excitement. “Did you see?” he was asking everyone. “I did it just the way Ser Loras said. Did you see, Ser Osney?”

“I did,” said Osney Kettleblack. “A pretty sight.”

“You have a better seat than me, sire,” put in Ser Dermot.

“I broke the lance too. Ser Loras, did you hear it?”

“As loud as a crack of thunder.” A rose of jade and gold clasped Ser Loras’s white cloak at the shoulder, and the wind was riffing artfully

through his brown locks. “You rode a splendid course, but once is not enough. You must do it again upon the morrow. You must ride every day, until every blow lands true and straight, and your lance is as much a part of you as your arm.”

“I want to.”

“You were glorious.” Margaery went to one knee, kissed the king upon his cheek, and put an arm around him. “Brother, take care,” she warned Loras. “My gallant husband will be unhorsing you in a few more years, I think.” Her three cousins all agreed, and the wretched little Bulwer girl began to hop about, chanting, “Tommen will be the *champion*, the *champion*, the *champion*.”

“When he is a man grown,” said Cersei.

Their smiles withered like roses kissed by frost. The pock-faced old septa was the first to bend her knee. The rest followed, save for the little queen and her brother.

Tommen did not seem to notice the sudden chill in the air. “Mother, did you see me?” he burred happily. “I broke my lance on the shield, and the bag never hit me!”

“I was watching from across the yard. You did very well, Tommen. I would expect no less of you. Jousting is in your blood. One day you shall rule the lists, as your father did.”

“No man will stand before him.” Margaery Tyrell gave the queen a coy smile. “But I never knew that King Robert was so accomplished at the joust. Pray tell us, Your Grace, what tourneys did he win? What great knights did he unseat? I know the king should like to hear about his father’s victories.”

A flush crept up Cersei’s neck. The girl had caught her out. Robert Baratheon had been an indifferent jouster, in truth. During tourneys he had much preferred the *mêlée*, where he could beat men bloody with blunted axe or hammer. It had been Jaime she had been thinking of when she spoke. *It is not like me to forget myself.* “Robert won the tourney of the Trident,” she had to say. “He overthrew Prince Rhaegar and named me his queen of

love and beauty. I am surprised you do not know that story, good-daughter.” She gave Margaery no time to frame a reply. “Ser Osmund, help my son from his armor, if you would be so good. Ser Loras, walk with me. I need a word with you.”

The Knight of Flowers had no recourse but to follow at her heels like the puppy he was. Cersei waited until they were on the serpentine steps before she said, “Whose notion was that, pray?”

“My sister’s,” he admitted. “Ser Tallad, Ser Dermot, and Ser Portifer were riding at the quintain, and the queen suggested that His Grace might like to have a turn.”

He calls her that to irk me. “And your part?”

“I helped His Grace to don his armor and showed him how to couch his lance,” he answered.

“That horse was much too large for him. What if he had fallen off? What if the sandbag had smashed his head in?”

“Bruises and bloody lips are all part of being a knight.”

“I begin to understand why your brother is a cripple.” That wiped the smile off his pretty face, she was pleased to see. “Perhaps my brother failed to explain your duties to you, ser. You are here to protect my son from his enemies. Training him for knighthood is the province of the master-at-arms.”

“The Red Keep has had no master-at-arms since Aron Santagar was slain,” Ser Loras said, with a hint of reproach in his voice. “His Grace is almost nine, and eager to learn. At his age he should be a squire. Someone has to teach him.”

*Someone will, but it will not be you.* “Pray, who did you squire for, ser?” she asked sweetly. “Lord Renly, was it not?”

“I had that honor.”

“Yes, I thought as much.” Cersei had seen how tight the bonds grew between squires and the knights they served. She did not want Tommen growing close to Loras Tyrell. The Knight of Flowers was no sort of man for any boy to emulate. “I have been remiss. With a realm to rule, a war to



fight, and a father to mourn, somehow I overlooked the crucial matter of naming a new master-at-arms. I shall rectify that error at once.”

Ser Loras pushed back a brown curl that had fallen across his forehead. “Your Grace will not find any man half so skilled with sword and lance as I.”

*Humble, aren't we?* “Tommen is your king, not your squire. You are to fight for him and die for him, if need be. No more.”

She left him on the drawbridge that spanned the dry moat with its bed of iron spikes and entered Maegor's Holdfast alone. *Where am I to find a master-at-arms?* she wondered as she climbed to her apartments. Having refused Ser Loras, she dare not turn to any of the Kingsguard knights; that would be salt in the wound, certain to anger Highgarden. *Ser Tallad? Ser Dermot? There must be someone.* Tommen was growing fond of his new sworn shield, but Osney was proving himself less capable than she had hoped in the matter of Maid Margaery, and she had a different office in mind for his brother Osfryd. It was rather a pity that the Hound had gone rabid. Tommen had always been frightened of Sandor Clegane's harsh voice and burned face, and Clegane's scorn would have been the perfect antidote to Loras Tyrell's simpering chivalry.

Aron Santagar was Dornish, Cersei recalled. I could send to Dorne. Centuries of blood and war lay between Sunspear and Highgarden. Yes, a Dornishman might suit my needs admirably. There must be some good swords in Dorne.

When she entered her solar, Cersei found Lord Qyburn reading in a window seat. “If it please Your Grace, I have reports.”

“More plots and treasons?” Cersei asked. “I have had a long and tiring day. Tell me quickly.”

He smiled sympathetically. “As you wish. There is talk that the Archon of Tyrosh has offered terms to Lys, to end their present trade war. It had been rumored that Myr was about to enter the war on the Tyroshi side, but without the Golden Company the Myrish did not believe they...”

“What the Myrish believe does not concern me.” The Free Cities were always fighting one another. Their endless betrayals and alliances meant little and less to Westeros. “Do you have any news of more import?”

“The slave revolt in Astapor has spread to Meereen, it would seem. Sailors off a dozen ships speak of dragons...”

“Harpies. It is harpies in Meereen.” She remembered that from somewhere. Meereen was at the far end of the world, out east beyond Valyria. “Let the slaves revolt. Why should I care? We keep no slaves in Westeros. Is that all you have for me?”

“There is some news from Dorne that Your Grace may find of more interest. Prince Doran has imprisoned Ser Daemon Sand, a bastard who once squired for the Red Viper.”

“I recall him.” Ser Daemon had been amongst the Dornish knights who had accompanied Prince Oberyn to King’s Landing. “What did he do?”

“He demanded that Prince Oberyn’s daughters be set free.”

“More fool him.”

“Also,” Lord Qyburn said, “the daughter of the Knight of Spottswood was betrothed quite unexpectedly to Lord Estermont, our friends in Dorne inform us. She was sent to Greenstone that very night, and it is said she and Estermont have already wed.”

“A bastard in the belly would explain that.” Cersei toyed with a lock of her hair. “How old is the blushing bride?”

“Three-and-twenty, Your Grace. Whereas Lord Estermont—”

“—must be seventy. I am aware of that.” The Estermonts were her good-kin through Robert, whose father had taken one of them to wife in what must have been a fit of lust or madness. By the time Cersei wed the king, Robert’s lady mother was long dead, though both of her brothers had turned up for the wedding and stayed for half a year. Robert had later insisted on returning the courtesy with a visit to Estermont, a mountainous little island off Cape Wrath. The dank and dismal fortnight Cersei spent at Greenstone, the seat of House Estermont, was the longest of her young life. Jaime dubbed the castle “*Greenshit*” at first sight, and soon had Cersei

doing it too. Elsewise she passed her days watching her royal husband hawk, hunt, and drink with his uncles, and bludgeon various male cousins senseless in Greenshit's yard.

There had been a female cousin too, a chunky little widow with breasts as big as melons whose husband and father had both died at Storm's End during the siege. "Her father was good to me," Robert told her, "and she and I would play together when the two of us were small." It did not take him long to start playing with her again. As soon as Cersei closed her eyes, the king would steal off to console the poor lonely creature. One night she had Jaime follow him, to confirm her suspicions. When her brother returned he asked her if she wanted Robert dead. "No," she had replied, "I want him horned." She liked to think that was the night when Joffrey was conceived.

"Eldon Estermont has taken a wife fifty years his junior," she said to Qyburn. "Why should that concern me?"

He shrugged. "I do not say it should... but Daemon Sand and this Santagar girl were both close to Prince Doran's own daughter, Arianne, or so the Dornishmen would have us believe. Perhaps it means little or less, but I thought Your Grace should know."

"Now I do." She was losing patience. "Do you have more?"

"One more thing. A trifling matter." He gave her an apologetic smile and told her of a puppet show that had recently become popular amongst the city's smallfolk; a puppet show wherein the kingdom of the beasts was ruled by a pride of haughty lions. "The puppet lions grow greedy and arrogant as this treasonous tale proceeds, until they begin to devour their own subjects. When the noble stag makes objection, the lions devour him as well, and roar that it is their right as the mightiest of beasts."

"And is that the end of it?" Cersei asked, amused. Looked at in the right light, it could be seen as a salutary lesson.

"No, Your Grace. At the end a dragon hatches from an egg and devours all of the lions."

The ending took the puppet show from simple insolence to treason. "Witless fools. Only cretins would hazard their heads upon a wooden

dragon.” She considered a moment. “Send some of your whisperers to these shows and make note of who attends. If any of them should be men of note, I would know their names.”

“What will be done with them, if I may be so bold?”

“Any men of substance shall be fined. Half their worth should be sufficient to teach them a sharp lesson and refill our coffers, without quite ruining them. Those too poor to pay can lose an eye, for watching treason. For the puppeteers, the axe.”

“There are four. Perhaps Your Grace might allow me two of them for mine own purposes. A woman would be especially...”

“I gave you Senelle,” the queen said sharply.

“Alas. The poor girl is quite... exhausted.”

Cersei did not like to think about that. The girl had come with her unsuspecting, thinking she was along to serve and pour. Even when Qyburn clapped the chain around her wrist, she had not seemed to understand. The memory still made the queen queasy. *The cells were bitter cold. Even the torches shivered. And that foul thing screaming in the darkness...* “Yes, you may take a woman. Two, if it please you. But first I will have names.”

“As you command.” Qyburn withdrew.

Outside, the sun was setting. Dorcas had prepared a bath for her. The queen was soaking pleasantly in the warm water and contemplating what she would say to her supper guests when Jaime came bursting through the door and ordered Jocelyn and Dorcas from the room. Her brother looked rather less than immaculate and had a smell of horse about him. He had Tommen with him too. “Sweet sister,” he said, “the king requires a word.”

Cersei’s golden tresses floated in the bathwater. The room was steamy. A drop of sweat trickled down her cheek. “Tommen?” she said, in a dangerously soft voice. “What is it now?”

The boy knew that tone. He shrank back.

“His Grace wants his white courser on the morrow,” Jaime said. “For his jousting lesson.”

She sat up in the tub. “There will be no jousting.”

“Yes, there will.” Tommen puffed out his lower lip. “I have to ride *every day*.”

“And you shall,” the queen declared, “once we have a proper master-at-arms to supervise your training.”

“I don’t *want* a proper master-at-arms. I want Ser Loras.”

“You make too much of that boy. Your little wife has filled your head with foolish notions of his prowess, I know, but Osmund Kettleblack is thrice the knight that Loras is.”

Jaime laughed. “Not the Osmund Kettleblack I know.”

She could have throttled him. *Perhaps I need to command Ser Loras to allow Ser Osmund to unhorse him.* That might chase the stars from Tommen’s eyes. *Salt a slug and shame a hero, and they shrink right up.* “I am sending for a Dornishman to train you,” she said. “The Dornish are the finest jousters in the realm.”

“They are not,” said Tommen. “Anyway, I don’t want any stupid Dornishman, I want *Ser Loras*. I *command* it.”

Jaime laughed. *He is no help at all. Does he think this is amusing?* The queen slapped the water angrily. “Must I send for Pate? You do *not* command me. I am your mother.”

“Yes, but I’m the *king*. Margaery says that everyone has to do what the king says. I want my white courser saddled on the morrow so Ser Loras can teach me how to joust. I want a kitten too, and I don’t want to eat beets.” He crossed his arms.

Jaime was still laughing. The queen ignored him. “Tommen, come here.” When he hung back, she sighed. “Are you afraid? A king should not show fear.” The boy approached the tub, his eyes downcast. She reached out and stroked his golden curls. “King or no, you are a little boy. Until you come of age, the rule is mine. You *will* learn to joust, I promise you. But not from Loras. The knights of the Kingsguard have more important duties than playing with a child. Ask the Lord Commander. Isn’t that so, ser?”

“Very important duties.” Jaime smiled thinly. “Riding round the city walls, for an instance.”

Tommen looked close to tears. “Can I still have a kitten?”

“Perhaps,” the queen allowed. “So long as I hear no more nonsense about jousting. Can you promise me that?”

He shuffled his feet. “Yes.”

“Good. Now run along. My guests will be here shortly.”

Tommen ran along, but before he left he turned back to say, “When I’m king in my own right, I’m going to *outlaw* beets.”

Her brother shoved the door shut with his stump. “Your Grace,” he said, when he and Cersei were alone, “I was wondering. Are you drunk, or merely stupid?”

She slapped the water once again, sending up another splash to wash across his feet. “Guard your tongue, or—”

“—or what? Will you send me to inspect the city walls again?” He sat and crossed his legs. “Your bloody walls are fine. I’ve crawled over every inch of them and had a look at all seven of the gates. The hinges on the Iron Gate are rusted, and the King’s Gate and Mud Gate need to be replaced after the pounding Stannis gave them with his rams. The walls are as strong as they have ever been... but perchance Your Grace has forgotten that our friends of Highgarden are *inside* the walls?”

“I forget nothing,” she told him, thinking of a certain gold coin, with a hand on one face and the head of a forgotten king on the other. *How did some miserable wretch of a gaoler come to have such a coin hidden beneath his chamber pot? How does a man like Rugen come to have old gold from Highgarden?*

“This is the first I have heard of a new master-at-arms. You’ll need to look long and hard to find a better jouster than Loras Tyrell. Ser Loras is—”

“I know what he is. I won’t have him near my son. You had best remind him of his duties.” Her bath was growing cool.

“He knows his duties, and there’s no better lance—”

“*You* were better, before you lost your hand. Ser Barristan, when he was young. Arthur Dayne was better, and Prince Rhaegar was a match for even him. Do not prate at me about how fierce the Flower is. He’s just a boy.”

She was tired of Jaime balking her. No one had ever balked her lord father. When Tywin Lannister spoke, men obeyed. When Cersei spoke, they felt free to counsel her, to contradict her, even *refuse* her. *It is all because I am a woman. Because I cannot fight them with a sword. They gave Robert more respect than they give me, and Robert was a witless sot.* She would not suffer it, especially not from Jaime. *I need to rid myself of him, and soon.* Once upon a time she had dreamt that the two of them might rule the Seven Kingdoms side by side, but Jaime had become more of a hindrance than a help.

Cersei rose from the bath. Water ran down her legs and trickled from her hair. “When I want your counsel I will ask for it. Leave me, ser. I must needs dress.”

“Your supper guests, I know. What plot is this, now? There are so many I lose track.” His glance fell to the water beading in the golden hair between her legs.

*He still wants me.* “Pining for what you’ve lost, brother?”

Jaime raised his eyes. “I love you too, sweet sister. But you’re a fool. A beautiful golden fool.”

The words stung. *You called me kinder words at Greenstone, the night you planted Joff inside me,* Cersei thought. “Get out.” She turned her back to him and listened to him leave, fumbling at the door with his stump.

Whilst Jocelyn was making certain that all was in readiness for the supper, Dorcas helped the queen into her new gown. It had stripes of shiny green satin alternating with stripes of plush black velvet, and intricate black Myrish lace above the bodice. Myrish lace was costly, but it was necessary for a queen to look her best at all times, and her wretched washerwomen had shrunk several of her old gowns so they no longer fit. She would have whipped them for their carelessness, but Taena had urged her to be merciful. “The smallfolk will love you more if you are kind,” she had said, so Cersei had ordered the value of the gowns deducted from the women’s wages, a much more elegant solution.

Dorcas put a silver looking glass into her hand. *Very good,* the queen thought, smiling at her reflection. It was pleasant to be out of mourning.

Black made her look too pale. *A pity I am not supping with Lady Merryweather*, the queen reflected. It had been a long day, and Taena's wit always cheered her. Cersei had not had a friend she so enjoyed since Melara Hetherspoon, and Melara had turned out to be a greedy little schemer with ideas above her station. *I should not think ill of her. She's dead and drowned, and she taught me never to trust anyone but Jaime.*

By the time she joined them in the solar, her guests had made a good start on the hippocras. *Lady Falyse not only looks like a fish, she drinks like one*, she reflected, when she made note of the half-empty flagon. "Sweet Falyse," she exclaimed, kissing the woman's cheek, "and brave Ser Balman. I was so distraught when I heard about your dear, dear mother. How fares our Lady Tanda?"

Lady Falyse looked as if she were about to cry. "Your Grace is good to ask. Mother's hip was shattered by the fall, Maester Frenken says. He did what he could. Now we pray, but..."

*Pray all you like, she will still be dead before the moon turns.* Women as old as Tanda Stokeworth did not survive a broken hip. "I shall add my prayers to your own," said Cersei. "Lord Qyburn tells me that Tanda was thrown from her horse."

"Her saddle girth burst whilst she was riding," said Ser Balman Byrch. "The stableboy should have seen the strap was worn. He has been chastised."

"Severely, I hope." The queen seated herself and indicated that her guests should sit as well. "Will you have another cup of hippocras, Falyse? You were always fond of it, I seem to recall."

"It is so good of you to remember, Your Grace."

How could I have forgotten? Cersei thought. Jaime said it was a wonder you did not piss the stuff. "How was your journey?"

"Uncomfortable," complained Falyse. "It rained most of the day. We thought to spend the night at Rosby, but that young ward of Lord Gyles refused us hospitality." She sniffed. "Mark my word, when Gyles dies that ill-born wretch will make off with his gold. He may even try and claim the



lands and lordship, though by rights Rosby should come to us when Gyles passes. My lady mother was aunt to his second wife, third cousin to Gyles himself.”

*Is your sigil a lamb, my lady, or some sort of grasping monkey?* Cersei thought. “Lord Gyles has been threatening to die for as long as I have known him, but he is still with us, and will be for many years, I do hope.” She smiled pleasantly. “No doubt he will cough the whole lot of us into our graves.”

“Like as not,” Ser Balman agreed. “Rosby’s ward was not the only one to vex us, Your Grace. We encountered ruffians on the road as well. Filthy, unkempt creatures, with leather shields and axes. Some had stars sewn on their jerkins, sacred stars of seven points, but they had an evil look about them all the same.”

“They were lice-ridden, I am certain,” added Falyse.

“They call themselves *sparrows*,” said Cersei. “A plague upon the land. Our new High Septon will need to deal with them, once he is crowned. If not, I shall deal with them myself.”

“Has His High Holiness been chosen yet?” asked Falyse.

“No,” the queen had to confess. “Septon Ollidor was on the verge of being chosen, until some of these sparrows followed him to a brothel and dragged him naked out into the street. Luceon seems the likely choice now, though our friends on the other hill say that he is still a few votes short of the required number.”

“May the Crone guide the deliberations with her golden lamp of wisdom,” said Lady Falyse, most piously.

Ser Balman shifted in his seat. “Your Grace, an awkward matter, but... lest bad feeling fester between us, you should know that neither my good wife nor her mother had any hand in the naming of this bastard child. Lollys is a simple creature, and her husband is given to black humors. I told him to choose a more fitting name for the boy. He laughed.”

The queen sipped her wine and studied him. Ser Balman had been a noted jousting knight once, and one of the handsomest knights in the Seven

Kingdoms. He could still boast a handsome mustache; otherwise, he had not aged well. His wavy blond hair had retreated, whilst his belly advanced inexorably against his doublet. *As a catspaw he leaves much to be desired*, she reflected. *Still, he should serve*. “Tyrion was a king’s name before the dragons came. The Imp has despoiled it, but perhaps this child can restore the name to honor.” *If the bastard lives so long*. “I know you are not to blame. Lady Tanda is the sister that I never had, and you...” Her voice broke. “Forgive me. I live in fear.”

Falyse opened and closed her mouth, which made her look like some especially stupid fish. “In... in fear, Your Grace?”

“I have not slept a whole night through since Joffrey died.” Cersei filled the goblets with hippocras. “My friends... you *are* my friends, I hope? And King Tommen’s?”

“That sweet lad,” Ser Balman declared. “Your Grace, the very words of House Stokeworth are *Proud to Be Faithful*.”

“Would that there were more like you, good ser. I tell you truly, I have grave doubts about Ser Bronn of the Blackwater.”

Husband and wife exchanged a look. “The man is insolent, Your Grace,” Falyse said. “Uncouth and foul-mouthed.”

“He is no true knight,” Ser Balman said.

“No.” Cersei smiled, all for him. “And you are a man who would know true knighthood. I remember watching you joust in... which tourney was it where you fought so brilliantly, ser?”

He smiled modestly. “That affair at Duskenale six years ago? No, you were not there, else you would surely have been crowned the queen of love and beauty. Was it the tourney at Lannisport after Greyjoy’s Rebellion? I unhorsed many a good knight in that one...”

“That was the one.” Her face grew somber. “The Imp vanished the night my father died, leaving two honest gaolers behind in pools of blood. Some claim he fled across the narrow sea, but I wonder. The dwarf is cunning. Perhaps he still lurks near, planning more murders. Perhaps some friend is hiding him.”

“Bronn?” Ser Balman stroked his bushy mustache.

“He was ever the Imp’s creature. Only the Stranger knows how many men he’s sent to hell at Tyrion’s behest.”

“Your Grace, I think I should have noticed a dwarf skulking about our lands,” said Ser Balman.

“My brother is small. He was made for skulking.” Cersei let her hand shake. “A child’s name is a small thing... but insolence unpunished breeds rebellion. And this man Bronn has been gathering sellswords to him, Qyburn has told me.”

“He has taken four knights into his household,” said Falyse.

Ser Balman snorted. “My good wife flatters them, to call them knights. They’re upjumped sellswords, with not a thimble of chivalry to be found amongst the four of them.”

“As I feared. Bronn is gathering swords for the dwarf. May the Seven save my little son. The Imp will kill him as he killed his brother.” She sobbed. “My friends, I put my honor in your hands... but what is a queen’s honor against a mother’s fears?”

“Say on, Your Grace,” Ser Balman assured her. “Your words shall ne’er leave this room.”

Cersei reached across the table and gave his hand a squeeze. “I... I would sleep more easily of a night if I were to hear that Ser Bronn had suffered a... a mishap... whilst hunting, perhaps.”

Ser Balman considered a moment. “A *mortal* mishap?”

No, I desire you to break his little toe. She had to bite her lip. My enemies are everywhere and my friends are fools. “I beg you, ser,” she whispered, “do not make me say it...”

“I understand.” Ser Balman raised a finger.

*A turnip would have grasped it quicker.* “You are a true knight indeed, ser. The answer to a frightened mother’s prayers.” Cersei kissed him. “Do it quickly, if you would. Bronn has only a few men about him now, but if we do not act, he will surely gather more.” She kissed Falyse. “I shall never forget this, my friends. My *true* friends of Stokeworth. *Proud to Be*

*Faithful.* You have my word, we shall find Lollys a better husband when this is done.” *A Kettleblack, perhaps.* “We Lannisters pay our debts.”

The rest was hippocras and buttered beets, hot-baked bread, herb-crusted pike, and ribs of wild boar. Cersei had become very fond of boar since Robert’s death. She did not even mind the company, though Falyse simpered and Balman preened from soup to sweet. It was past midnight before she could rid herself of them. Ser Balman proved a great one for suggesting yet another flagon, and the queen did not think it prudent to refuse. *I could have hired a Faceless Man to kill Bronn for half of what I’ve spent on hippocras,* she reflected when they were gone at last.

At that hour, her son was fast asleep, but Cersei looked in upon him before seeking her own bed. She was surprised to find three black kittens cuddled up beside him. “Where did those come from?” she asked Ser Meryn Trant, outside the royal bedchamber.

“The little queen gave them to him. She only meant to give him one, but he couldn’t decide which one he liked the best.”

*Better than cutting them out of their mother with a dagger, I suppose.* Margaery’s clumsy attempts at seduction were so obvious as to be laughable. *Tommen is too young for kisses, so she gives him kittens.* Cersei rather wished they were not black, though. Black cats brought ill luck, as Rhaegar’s little girl had discovered in this very castle. *She would have been my daughter, if the Mad King had not played his cruel jape on Father.* It had to have been the madness that led Aerys to refuse Lord Tywin’s daughter and take his son instead, whilst marrying his own son to a feeble Dornish princess with black eyes and a flat chest.

The memory of the rejection still rankled, even after all these years. Many a night she had watched Prince Rhaegar in the hall, playing his silver-stringed harp with those long, elegant fingers of his. Had any man ever been so beautiful? *He was more than a man, though. His blood was the blood of old Valyria, the blood of dragons and gods.* When she was just a little girl, her father had promised her that she would marry Rhaegar. She could not have been more than six or seven. “Never speak of it, child,” he had told her, smiling his secret smile that only Cersei ever saw. “Not until His Grace

agrees to the betrothal. It must remain our secret for now.” And so it had, though once she had drawn a picture of herself flying behind Rhaegar on a dragon, her arms wrapped tight about his chest. When Jaime had discovered it she told him it was Queen Alysanne and King Jaehaerys.

She was ten when she finally saw her prince in the flesh, at the tourney her lord father had thrown to welcome King Aerys to the west. Viewing stands had been raised beneath the walls of Lannisport, and the cheers of the smallfolk had echoed off Casterly Rock like rolling thunder. *They cheered Father twice as loudly as they cheered the king*, the queen recalled, *but only half as loudly as they cheered Prince Rhaegar*.

Seventeen and new to knighthood, Rhaegar Targaryen had worn black plate over golden ringmail when he cantered onto the lists. Long streamers of red and gold and orange silk had floated behind his helm, like flames. Two of her uncles fell before his lance, along with a dozen of her father’s finest jousts, the flower of the west. By night the prince played his silver harp and made her weep. When she had been presented to him, Cersei had almost drowned in the depths of his sad purple eyes. *He has been wounded*, she recalled thinking, *but I will mend his hurt when we are wed*. Next to Rhaegar, even her beautiful Jaime had seemed no more than a callow boy. *The prince is going to be my husband*, she had thought, giddy with excitement, *and when the old king dies I’ll be the queen*. Her aunt had confided that truth to her before the tourney. “You must be especially beautiful,” Lady Genna told her, fussing with her dress, “for at the final feast it shall be announced that you and Prince Rhaegar are betrothed.”

Cersei had been so happy that day. Elsewise she would never have dared visit the tent of Maggy the Frog. She had only done it to show Jeyne and Melara that the lioness fears nothing. *I was going to be a queen. Why should a queen be afraid of some hideous old woman?* The memory of that foretelling still made her flesh crawl a lifetime later. *Jeyne ran shrieking from the tent in fear*, the queen remembered, *but Melara stayed and so did I. We let her taste our blood, and laughed at her stupid prophecies. None of them made the least bit of sense*. She was going to be Prince Rhaegar’s

wife, no matter what the woman said. Her *father* had promised it, and Tywin Lannister's word was gold.

Her laughter died at tourney's end. There had been no final feast, no toasts to celebrate her betrothal to Prince Rhaegar. Only cold silences and chilly looks between the king and her father. Later, when Aerys and his son and all his gallant knights had departed for King's Landing, the girl had gone to her aunt in tears, not understanding. "Your father proposed the match," Lady Genna told her, "but Aerys refused to hear of it. 'You are my most able servant, Tywin,' the king said, 'but a man does not marry his heir to his servant's daughter.' Dry those tears, little one. Have you ever seen a lion weep? Your father will find another man for you, a better man than Rhaegar."

Her aunt had lied, though, and her father had failed her, just as Jaime was failing her now. *Father found no better man. Instead he gave me Robert, and Maggy's curse bloomed like some poisonous flower.* If she had only married Rhaegar as the gods intended, he would never have looked twice at the wolf girl. *Rhaegar would be our king today and I would be his queen, the mother of his sons.*

She had never forgiven Robert for killing him.

But then, lions were not good at forgiving. As Ser Bronn of the Blackwater would shortly learn.