



JAIME

Two days' ride to either side of the kingsroad, they passed through a wide swath of destruction, miles of blackened fields and orchards where the trunks of dead trees jutted into the air like archers' stakes. The bridges were burnt as well, and the streams swollen by autumn rains, so they had to range along the banks in search of fords. The nights were alive with howling of wolves, but they saw no people.

At Maidenpool, Lord Mooton's red salmon still flew above the castle on its hill, but the town walls were deserted, the gates smashed, half the homes and shops burned or plundered. They saw nothing living but a few feral dogs that went slinking away at the sound of their approach. The pool from which the town took its name, where legend said that Florian the Fool had first glimpsed Jonquil bathing with her sisters, was so choked with rotting corpses that the water had turned into a murky grey-green soup.

Jaime took one look and burst into song. "*Six maids there were in a spring-fed pool . . .*"

"What are you *doing*?" Brienne demanded.

"Singing. 'Six Maids in a Pool,' I'm sure you've heard it. And shy little maids they were, too. Rather like you. Though somewhat prettier, I'll warrant."

"Be quiet," the wench said, with a look that suggested she would love to leave him floating in the pool among the corpses.

“Please, Jaime,” pleaded cousin Cleos. “Lord Mooton is sworn to Riverrun, we don’t want to draw him out of his castle. And there may be other enemies hiding in the rubble . . .”

“Hers or ours? They are not the same, coz. I have a yen to see if the wench can use that sword she wears.”

“If you won’t be quiet, you leave me no choice but to gag you, Kingslayer.”

“Unchain my hands and I’ll play mute all the way to King’s Landing. What could be fairer than that, wench?”

“*Brienne!* My name is *Brienne!*” Three crows went flapping into the air, startled at the sound.

“Care for a bath, Brienne?” He laughed. “You’re a maiden and there’s the pool. I’ll wash your back.” He used to scrub Cersei’s back, when they were children together at Casterly Rock.

The wench turned her horse’s head and trotted away. Jaime and Ser Cleos followed her out of the ashes of Maidenpool. A half mile on, green began to creep back into the world once more. Jaime was glad. The burned lands reminded him too much of Aerys.

“She’s taking the Duskendale road,” Ser Cleos muttered. “It would be safer to follow the coast.”

“Safer but slower. I’m for Duskendale, coz. If truth be told, I’m bored with your company.” *You may be half Lannister, but you’re a far cry from my sister.*

He could never bear to be long apart from his twin. Even as children, they would creep into each other’s beds and sleep with their arms entwined. *Even in the womb.* Long before his sister’s flowering or the advent of his own manhood, they had seen mares and stallions in the fields and dogs and bitches in the kennels and played at doing the same. Once their mother’s maid had caught them at it . . . he did not recall just what they had been doing, but whatever it was had horrified Lady Joanna. She’d sent the maid away, moved Jaime’s bedchamber to the other side of Casterly Rock, set a guard outside Cersei’s, and told them that they must *never* do that again or she would have no choice but to tell their lord father. They need not have

feared, though. It was not long after that she died birthing Tyrion. Jaime barely remembered what his mother had looked like.

Perhaps Stannis Baratheon and the Starks had done him a kindness. They had spread their tale of incest all over the Seven Kingdoms, so there was nothing left to hide. *Why shouldn't I marry Cersei openly and share her bed every night? The dragons always married their sisters.* Septons, lords, and smallfolk had turned a blind eye to the Targaryens for hundreds of years, let them do the same for House Lannister. It would play havoc with Joffrey's claim to the crown, to be sure, but in the end it had been swords that had won the Iron Throne for Robert, and swords could keep Joffrey there as well, regardless of whose seed he was. *We could marry him to Myrcella, once we've sent Sansa Stark back to her mother. That would show the realm that the Lannisters are above their laws, like gods and Targaryens.*

Jaime had decided that he *would* return Sansa, and the younger girl as well if she could be found. It was not like to win him back his lost honor, but the notion of keeping faith when they all expected betrayal amused him more than he could say.

They were riding past a trampled wheatfield and a low stone wall when Jaime heard a soft *thrum* from behind, as if a dozen birds had taken flight at once. "*Down!*" he shouted, throwing himself against the neck of his horse. The gelding screamed and reared as an arrow took him in the rump. Other shafts went hissing past. Jaime saw Ser Cleos lurch from the saddle, twisting as his foot caught in the stirrup. His palfrey bolted, and Frey was dragged past shouting, head bouncing against the ground.

Jaime's gelding lumbered off ponderously, blowing and snorting in pain. He craned around to look for Brienne. She was still ahorse, an arrow lodged in her back and another in her leg, but she seemed not to feel them. He saw her pull her sword and wheel in a circle, searching for the bowmen. "*Behind the wall,*" Jaime called, fighting to turn his half-blind mount back toward the fight. The reins were tangled in his damned chains, and the air was full of arrows again. "*At them!*" he shouted, kicking to show her how it was done. The old sorry horse found a burst of speed from somewhere. Suddenly they were racing across the wheatfield, throwing up clouds of chaff. Jaime had just enough time to think, *The wench had better follow before they realize they're being charged by an unarmed man in chains.*

Then he heard her coming hard behind. “Evenfall!” she shouted as her plow horse thundered by. She brandished her longsword. “Tarth! Tarth!”

A few last arrows sped harmlessly past; then the bowmen broke and ran, the way unsupported bowmen always broke and ran before the charge of knights. Brienne reined up at the wall. By the time Jaime reached her, they had all melted into the wood twenty yards away. “Lost your taste for battle?”

“They were running.”

“That’s the best time to kill them.”

She sheathed her sword. “Why did you charge?”

“Bowmen are fearless so long as they can hide behind walls and shoot at you from afar, but if you come at them, they run. They know what will happen when you reach them. You have an arrow in your back, you know. And another in your leg. You ought to let me tend them.”

“You?”

“Who else? The last I saw of cousin Cleos, his palfrey was using his head to plow a furrow. Though I suppose we ought to find him. He *is* a Lannister of sorts.”

They found Cleos still tangled in his stirrup. He had an arrow through his right arm and a second in his chest, but it was the ground that had done for him. The top of his head was matted with blood and mushy to the touch, pieces of broken bone moving under the skin beneath the pressure of Jaime’s hand.

Brienne knelt and held his hand. “He’s still warm.”

“He’ll cool soon enough. I want his horse and his clothes. I’m weary of rags and fleas.”

“He was your cousin.” The wench was shocked.

“*Was*,” Jaime agreed. “Have no fear, I am amply provisioned in cousins. I’ll have his sword as well. You need someone to share the watches.”

“You can stand a watch without weapons.” She rose.

“Chained to a tree? Perhaps I could. Or perhaps I could make my own bargain with the next lot of outlaws and let them slit that thick neck of

yours, wench.”

“I will not arm you. And my name is—”

“—Brienne, I know. I’ll swear an oath not to harm you, if that will ease your girlish fears.”

“Your oaths are worthless. You swore an oath to Aerys.”

“You haven’t cooked anyone in their armor so far as I know. And we both want me safe and whole in King’s Landing, don’t we?” He squatted beside Cleos and began to undo his swordbelt.

“Step away from him. Now. Stop that.”

Jaime was tired. Tired of her suspicions, tired of her insults, tired of her crooked teeth and her broad spotty face and that limp thin hair of hers. Ignoring her protests, he grasped the hilt of his cousin’s longsword with both hands, held the corpse down with his foot, and pulled. As the blade slid from the scabbard, he was already pivoting, bringing the sword around and up in a swift deadly arc. Steel met steel with a ringing, bone-jarring *clang*. Somehow Brienne had gotten her own blade out in time. Jaime laughed. “Very good, wench.”

“Give me the sword, Kingslayer.”

“Oh, I will.” He sprang to his feet and drove at her, the longsword alive in his hands. Brienne jumped back, parrying, but he followed, pressing the attack. No sooner did she turn one cut than the next was upon her. The swords kissed and sprang apart and kissed again. Jaime’s blood was singing. This was what he was meant for; he never felt so alive as when he was fighting, with death balanced on every stroke. *And with my wrists chained together, the wench may even give me a contest for a time.* His chains forced him to use a two-handed grip, though of course the weight and reach were less than if the blade had been a true two-handed greatsword, but what did it matter? His cousin’s sword was long enough to write an end to this Brienne of Tarth.

High, low, overhand, he rained down steel upon her. Left, right, backslash, swinging so hard that sparks flew when the swords came together, upswing, sideslash, overhand, always attacking, moving into her,

step and slide, strike and step, step and strike, hacking, slashing, faster, faster, faster . . .

. . . until, breathless, he stepped back and let the point of the sword fall to the ground, giving her a moment of respite. “Not half bad,” he acknowledged. “For a wench.”

She took a slow deep breath, her eyes watching him warily. “I would not hurt you, Kingslayer.”

“As if you could.” He whirled the blade back up above his head and flew at her again, chains rattling.

Jaime could not have said how long he pressed the attack. It might have been minutes or it might have been hours; time slept when swords woke. He drove her away from his cousin’s corpse, drove her across the road, drove her into the trees. She stumbled once on a root she never saw, and for a moment he thought she was done, but she went to one knee instead of falling, and never lost a beat. Her sword leapt up to block a downcut that would have opened her from shoulder to groin, and then she cut at *him*, again and again, fighting her way back to her feet stroke by stroke.

The dance went on. He pinned her against an oak, cursed as she slipped away, followed her through a shallow brook half-choked with fallen leaves. Steel rang, steel sang, steel screamed and sparked and scraped, and the woman started grunting like a sow at every crash, yet somehow he could not reach her. It was as if she had an iron cage around her that stopped every blow.

“Not bad at all,” he said when he paused for a second to catch his breath, circling to her right.

“For a wench?”

“For a squire, say. A green one.” He laughed a ragged, breathless laugh. “Come on, come on, my sweetling, the music’s still playing. Might I have this dance, my lady?”

Grunting, she came at him, blade whirling, and suddenly it was Jaime struggling to keep steel from skin. One of her slashes raked across his brow, and blood ran down into his right eye. *The Others take her, and Riverrun as well!* His skills had gone to rust and rot in that bloody dungeon, and the

chains were no great help either. His eye closed, his shoulders were going numb from the jarring they'd taken, and his wrists ached from the weight of chains, manacles, and sword. His longsword grew heavier with every blow, and Jaime knew he was not swinging it as quickly as he'd done earlier, nor raising it as high.

She is stronger than I am.

The realization chilled him. Robert had been stronger than him, to be sure. The White Bull Gerold Hightower as well, in his heyday, and Ser Arthur Dayne. Amongst the living, Greatjon Umber was stronger, Strongboar of Crakehall most likely, both Cleganes for a certainty. The Mountain's strength was like nothing human. It did not matter. With speed and skill, Jaime could beat them all. But this was a *woman*. A huge cow of a woman, to be sure, but even so . . . by rights, she should be the one wearing down.

Instead she forced him back into the brook again, shouting, "Yield! Throw down the sword!"

A slick stone turned under Jaime's foot. As he felt himself falling, he twisted the mischance into a diving lunge. His point scraped past her parry and bit into her upper thigh. A red flower blossomed, and Jaime had an instant to savor the sight of her blood before his knee slammed into a rock. The pain was blinding. Brienne splashed into him and kicked away his sword. "*YIELD!*"

Jaime drove his shoulder into her legs, bringing her down on top of him. They rolled, kicking and punching until finally she was sitting astride him. He managed to jerk her dagger from its sheath, but before he could plunge it into her belly she caught his wrist and slammed his hands back on a rock so hard he thought she'd wrenched an arm from its socket. Her other hand spread across his face. "Yield!" She shoved his head down, held it under, pulled it up. "*Yield!*" Jaime spit water into her face. A shove, a splash, and he was under again, kicking uselessly, fighting to breathe. Up again. "*Yield, or I'll drown you!*"

"And break your oath?" he snarled. "Like me?"

She let him go, and he went down with a splash.

And the woods rang with coarse laughter.

Brienne lurched to her feet. She was all mud and blood below the waist, her clothing askew, her face red. *She looks as if they caught us fucking instead of fighting.* Jaime crawled over the rocks to shallow water, wiping the blood from his eye with his chained hands. Armed men lined both sides of the brook. *Small wonder, we were making enough noise to wake a dragon.* “Well met, friends,” he called to them amiably. “My pardons if I disturbed you. You caught me chastising my wife.”

“Seemed to me she was doing the *chastising*.” The man who spoke was thick and powerful, and the nasal bar of his iron halfhelm did not wholly conceal his lack of a nose.

These were not the outlaws who had killed Ser Cleos, Jaime realized suddenly. The scum of the earth surrounded them: swarthy Dornishmen and blond Lyseni, Dothraki with bells in their braids, hairy Ibbenese, coal-black Summer Islanders in feathered cloaks. He knew them. *The Brave Companions.*

Brienne found her voice. “I have a hundred stags—”

A cadaverous man in a tattered leather cloak said, “We’ll take that for a start, m’lady.”

“Then we’ll have your cunt,” said the noseless man. “It can’t be as ugly as the rest of you.”

“Turn her over and rape her arse, Rorge,” urged a Dornish spearman with a red silk scarf wound about his helm. “That way you won’t need to look at her.”

“And rob her o’ the pleasure o’ looking at *me*?” Noseless said, and the others laughed.

Ugly and stubborn though she might be, the wench deserved better than to be gang raped by such refuse as these. “Who commands here?” Jaime demanded loudly.

“I have that honor, Ser Jaime.” The cadaver’s eyes were rimmed in red, his hair thin and dry. Dark blue veins could be seen through the pallid skin of his hands and face. “Urswyck I am. Called Urswyck the Faithful.”

“You know who I am?”

The sellsword inclined his head. "It takes more than a beard and a shaved head to deceive the Brave Companions."

The Bloody Mummers, you mean. Jaime had no more use for these than he did for Gregor Clegane or Amory Lorch. *Dogs*, his father called them all, and he used them like dogs, to hound his prey and put fear in their hearts. "If you know me, Urswyck, you know you'll have your reward. A Lannister always pays his debts. As for the wench, she's highborn, and worth a good ransom."

The other cocked his head. "Is it so? How fortunate."

There was something sly about the way Urswyck was smiling that Jaime did not like. "You heard me. Where's the goat?"

"A few hours distant. He will be pleased to see you, I have no doubt, but I would not call him a goat to his face. *Lord Vargo* grows prickly about his dignity."

Since when has that slobbering savage had dignity? "I'll be sure and remember that, when I see him. Lord of what, pray?"

"Harrenhal. It has been promised."

Harrenhal? Has my father taken leave of his senses? Jaime raised his hands. "I'll have these chains off."

Urswyck's chuckle was papery dry.

Something is very wrong here. Jaime gave no sign of his discomfiture, but only smiled. "Did I say something amusing?"

Noseless grinned. "You're the funniest thing I seen since Biter chewed that septa's teats off."

"You and your father lost too many battles," offered the Dornishman. "We had to trade our lion pelts for wolfskins."

Urswyck spread his hands. "What Timeon means to say is that the Brave Companions are no longer in the hire of House Lannister. We now serve Lord Bolton, and the King in the North."

Jaime gave him a cold, contemptuous smile. "And men say *I* have shit for honor?"

Urswyck was unhappy with that comment. At his signal, two of the Mummers grasped Jaime by the arms and Rorge drove a mailed fist into his stomach. As he doubled over grunting, he heard the wench protesting, “Stop, he’s not to be harmed! Lady Catelyn sent us, an exchange of captives, he’s under my protection . . .” Rorge hit him again, driving the air from his lungs. Brienne dove for her sword beneath the waters of the brook, but the Mummers were on her before she could lay hands on it. Strong as she was, it took four of them to beat her into submission.

By the end the wench’s face was as swollen and bloody as Jaime’s must have been, and they had knocked out two of her teeth. It did nothing to improve her appearance. Stumbling and bleeding, the two captives were dragged back through the woods to the horses, Brienne limping from the thigh wound he’d given her in the brook. Jaime felt sorry for her. She would lose her maidenhood tonight, he had no doubt. That noseless bastard would have her for a certainty, and some of the others would likely take a turn.

The Dornishman bound them back to back atop Brienne’s plow horse while the other Mummers were stripping Cleos Frey to his skin to divvy up his possessions. Rorge won the bloodstained surcoat with its proud Lannister and Frey quarterings. The arrows had punched holes through lions and towers alike.

“I hope you’re pleased, wench,” Jaime whispered at Brienne. He coughed, and spat out a mouthful of blood. “If you’d armed me, we’d never have been taken.” She made no answer. *There’s a pig-stubborn bitch*, he thought. *But brave, yes*. He could not take that from her. “When we make camp for the night, you’ll be raped, and more than once,” he warned her. “You’d be wise not to resist. If you fight them, you’ll lose more than a few teeth.”

He felt Brienne’s back stiffen against his. “Is that what *you* would do, if you were a woman?”

If I were a woman I’d be Cersei. “If I were a woman, I’d make them kill me. But I’m not.” Jaime kicked their horse to a trot. “*Urswyck!* A word!”

The cadaverous sellsword in the ragged leather cloak reined up a moment, then fell in beside him. “What would you have of me, ser? And mind your tongue, or I’ll chastise you again.”

“Gold,” said Jaime. “You do like gold?”

Urswyck studied him through reddened eyes. “It has its uses, I do confess.”

Jaime gave Urswyck a knowing smile. “All the gold in Casterly Rock. Why let the goat enjoy it? Why not take us to King’s Landing, and collect my ransom for yourself? Hers as well, if you like. Tarth is called the Sapphire Isle, a maiden told me once.” The wench squirmed at that, but said nothing.

“Do you take me for a turncloak?”

“Certainly. What else?”

For half a heartbeat Urswyck considered the proposition. “King’s Landing is a long way, and your father is there. Lord Tywin may resent us for selling Harrenhal to Lord Bolton.”

He’s cleverer than he looks. Jaime had been looking forward to hanging the wretch while his pockets bulged with gold. “Leave me to deal with my father. I’ll get you a royal pardon for any crimes you have committed. I’ll get you a knighthood.”

“Ser Urswyck,” the man said, savoring the sound. “How proud my dear wife would be to hear it. If only I hadn’t killed her.” He sighed. “And what of brave Lord Vargo?”

“Shall I sing you a verse of ‘The Rains of Castamere’? The goat won’t be quite so brave when my father gets hold of him.”

“And how will he do that? Are your father’s arms so long that they can reach over the walls of Harrenhal and pluck us out?”

“If need be.” King Harren’s monstrous folly had fallen before, and it could fall again. “Are you such a fool as to think the goat can outfight the lion?”

Urswyck leaned over and slapped him lazily across the face. The sheer casual *insolence* of it was worse than the blow itself. *He does not fear me*, Jaime realized, with a chill. “I have heard enough, Kingslayer. I would have to be a great fool indeed to believe the promises of an oathbreaker like you.” He kicked his horse and galloped smartly ahead.

Aerys, Jaime thought resentfully. *It always turns on Aerys*. He swayed with the motion of his horse, wishing for a sword. *Two swords would be even better. One for the wench and one for me. We'd die, but we'd take half of them down to hell with us.* “Why did you tell him Tarth was the Sapphire Isle?” Brienne whispered when Urswyck was out of earshot. “He’s like to think my father’s rich in gemstones . . .”

“You best pray he does.”

“Is every word you say a lie, Kingslayer? Tarth is called the Sapphire Isle for the blue of its waters.”

“Shout it a little louder, wench, I don’t think Urswyck heard you. The sooner they know how little you’re worth in ransom, the sooner the rapes begin. Every man here will mount you, but what do you care? Just close your eyes, open your legs, and pretend they’re all Lord Renly.”

Mercifully, that shut her mouth for a time.

The day was almost done by the time they found Vargo Hoat, sacking a small sept with another dozen of his Brave Companions. The leaded windows had been smashed, the carved wooden gods dragged out into the sunlight. The fattest Dothraki Jaime had ever seen was sitting on the Mother’s chest when they rode up, prying out her chalcedony eyes with the point of his knife. Nearby, a skinny balding septon hung upside down from the limb of a spreading chestnut tree. Three of the Brave Companions were using his corpse for an archery butt. One of them must have been good; the dead man had arrows through both of his eyes.

When the sellswords spied Urswyck and the captives, a cry went up in half a dozen tongues. The goat was seated by a cookfire eating a half-cooked bird off a skewer, grease and blood running down his fingers into his long stringy beard. He wiped his hands on his tunic and rose. “*Kingthlayer*,” he slobbered. “You are my captifh.”

“My lord, I am Brienne of Tarth,” the wench called out. “Lady Catelyn Stark commanded me to deliver Ser Jaime to his brother at King’s Landing.”

The goat gave her a disinterested glance. “Thilence her.”

“Hear me,” Brienne entreated as Rorge cut the ropes that bound her to Jaime, “in the name of the King in the North, the king you serve, please, listen—”

Rorge dragged her off the horse and began to kick her. “See that you don’t break any bones,” Urswyck called out to him. “The horse-faced bitch is worth her weight in sapphires.”

The Dornishman Timeon and a foul-smelling Ibbenese pulled Jaime down from the saddle and shoved him roughly toward the cookfire. It would not have been hard for him to have grasped one of their sword hilts as they manhandled him, but there were too many, and he was still in fetters. He might cut down one or two, but in the end he would die for it. Jaime was not ready to die just yet, and certainly not for the likes of Brienne of Tarth.

“Thith ith a thweet day,” Vargo Hoat said. Around his neck hung a chain of linked coins, coins of every shape and size, cast and hammered, bearing the likenesses of kings, wizards, gods and demons, and all manner of fanciful beasts.

Coins from every land where he has fought, Jaime remembered. Greed was the key to this man. *If he was turned once, he can be turned again.* “Lord Vargo, you were foolish to leave my father’s service, but it is not too late to make amends. He will pay well for me, you know it.”

“Oh yeth,” said Vargo Hoat. “Half the gold in Catherly Rock, I thall have. But firth I mutht thend him a methage.” He said something in his slithery goatish tongue.

Urswyck shoved him in the back, and a jester in green and pink motley kicked his legs out from under him. When he hit the ground one of the archers grabbed the chain between Jaime’s wrists and used it to yank his arms out in front of him. The fat Dothraki put aside his knife to unsheathe a huge curved *arakh*, the wickedly sharp scythe-sword the horselords loved.

They mean to scare me. The fool hopped on Jaime’s back, giggling, as the Dothraki swaggered toward him. *The goat wants me to piss my breeches and beg his mercy, but he’ll never have that pleasure.* He was a Lannister of Casterly Rock, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard; no sellsword would make him scream.

Sunlight ran silver along the edge of the *arakh* as it came shivering down, almost too fast to see. And Jaime screamed.