



JAIME

Though his fever lingered stubbornly, the stump was healing clean, and Qyburn said his arm was no longer in danger. Jaime was anxious to be gone, to put Harrenhal, the Bloody Mummerys, and Brienne of Tarth all behind him. A real woman waited for him in the Red Keep.

“I am sending Qyburn with you, to look after you on the way to King’s Landing,” Roose Bolton said on the morn of their departure. “He has a fond hope that your father will force the Citadel to give him back his chain, in gratitude.”

“We all have fond hopes. If he grows me back a hand, my father will make him Grand Maester.”

Steelshanks Walton commanded Jaime’s escort; blunt, brusque, brutal, at heart a simple soldier. Jaime had served with his sort all his life. Men like Walton would kill at their lord’s command, rape when their blood was up after battle, and plunder wherever they could, but once the war was done they would go back to their homes, trade their spears for hoes, wed their neighbors’ daughters, and raise a pack of squalling children. Such men obeyed without question, but the deep malignant cruelty of the Brave Companions was not a part of their nature.

Both parties left Harrenhal the same morning, beneath a cold grey sky that promised rain. Ser Aenys Frey had marched three days before, striking northeast for the kingsroad. Bolton meant to follow him. “The Trident is in

flood,” he told Jaime. “Even at the ruby ford, the crossing will be difficult. You will give my warm regards to your father?”

“So long as you give mine to Robb Stark.”

“That I shall.”

Some Brave Companions had gathered in the yard to watch them leave. Jaime trotted over to where they stood. “Zollo. How kind of you to see me off. Pyg. Timeon. Will you miss me? No last jest to share, Shagwell? To lighten my way down the road? And Rorge, did you come to kiss me goodbye?”

“Bugger off, cripple,” said Rorge.

“If you insist. Rest assured, though, I will be back. A Lannister always pays his debts.” Jaime wheeled his horse around and rejoined Steelshanks Walton and his two hundred.

Lord Bolton had accoutred him as a knight, preferring to ignore the missing hand that made such warlike garb a travesty. Jaime rode with sword and dagger on his belt, shield and helm hung from his saddle, chainmail under a dark brown surcoat. He was not such a fool as to show the lion of Lannister on his arms, though, nor the plain white blazon that was his right as a Sworn Brother of the Kingsguard. He found an old shield in the armory, battered and splintered, the chipped paint still showing most of the great black bat of House Lothston upon a field of silver and gold. The Lothstons held Harrenhal before the Whents and had been a powerful family in their day, but they had died out ages ago, so no one was likely to object to him bearing their arms. He would be no one’s cousin, no one’s enemy, no one’s sworn sword . . . in sum, no one.

They left through Harrenhal’s smaller eastern gate, and took their leave of Roose Bolton and his host six miles farther on, turning south to follow along the lake road for a time. Walton meant to avoid the kingsroad as long as he could, preferring the farmer’s tracks and game trails near the Gods Eye.

“The kingsroad would be faster.” Jaime was anxious to return to Cersei as quickly as he could. If they made haste, he might even arrive in time for Joffrey’s wedding.

“I want no trouble,” said Steelshanks. “Gods know who we’d meet along that kingsroad.”

“No one you need fear, surely? You have two hundred men.”

“Aye. But others might have more. M’lord said to bring you safe to your lord father, and that’s what I mean to do.”

I have come this way before, Jaime reflected a few miles further on, when they passed a deserted mill beside the lake. Weeds now grew where once the miller’s daughter had smiled shyly at him, and the miller himself had shouted out, “The tourney’s back the other way, ser.” *As if I had not known.*

King Aerys made a great show of Jaime’s investiture. He said his vows before the king’s pavilion, kneeling on the green grass in white armor while half the realm looked on. When Ser Gerold Hightower raised him up and put the white cloak about his shoulders, a roar went up that Jaime still remembered, all these years later. But that very night Aerys had turned sour, declaring that he had no need of *seven* Kingsguard here at Harrenhal. Jaime was commanded to return to King’s Landing to guard the queen and little Prince Viserys, who’d remained behind. Even when the White Bull offered to take that duty himself, so Jaime might compete in Lord Whent’s tourney, Aerys had refused. “He’ll win no glory here,” the king had said. “He’s mine now, not Tywin’s. He’ll serve as I see fit. I am the king. I rule, and he’ll obey.”

That was the first time that Jaime understood. It was not his skill with sword and lance that had won him his white cloak, nor any feats of valor he’d performed against the Kingswood Brotherhood. Aerys had chosen him to spite his father, to rob Lord Tywin of his heir.

Even now, all these years later, the thought was bitter. And that day, as he’d ridden south in his new white cloak to guard an empty castle, it had been almost too much to stomach. He would have ripped the cloak off then and there if he could have, but it was too late. He had said the words whilst half the realm looked on, and a Kingsguard served for life.

Qyburn fell in beside him. “Is your hand troubling you?”

“The lack of my hand is troubling me.” The mornings were the hardest. In his dreams Jaime was a whole man, and each dawn he would lie half-awake and feel his fingers move. *It was a nightmare*, some part of him

would whisper, refusing to believe even now, *only a nightmare*. But then he would open his eyes.

“I understand you had a visitor last night,” said Qyburn. “I trust that you enjoyed her?”

Jaime gave him a cool look. “She did not say who sent her.”

The maester smiled modestly. “Your fever was largely gone, and I thought you might enjoy a bit of exercise. Pia is quite skilled, would you not agree? And so . . . willing.”

She had been that, certainly. She had slipped in his door and out of her clothes so quickly that Jaime had thought he was still dreaming.

It hadn’t been until the woman slid in under his blankets and put his good hand on her breast that he roused. *She was a pretty little thing, too*. “I was a slip of a girl when you came for Lord Whent’s tourney and the king gave you your cloak,” she confessed. “You were so handsome all in white, and everyone said what a brave knight you were. Sometimes when I’m with some man, I close my eyes and pretend it’s you on top of me, with your smooth skin and gold curls. I never truly thought I’d have you, though.”

Sending her away had not been easy after that, but Jaime had done it all the same. *I have a woman*, he reminded himself. “Do you send girls to everyone you leech?” he asked Qyburn.

“More often Lord Vargo sends them to me. He likes me to examine them, before . . . well, suffice it to say that once he loved unwisely, and he has no wish to do so again. But have no fear, Pia is quite healthy. As is your maid of Tarth.”

Jaime gave him a sharp look. “Brienne?”

“Yes. A strong girl, that one. And her maidenhead is still intact. As of last night, at least.” Qyburn gave a chuckle.

“He sent you to examine her?”

“To be sure. He is . . . fastidious, shall we say?”

“Does this concern the ransom?” Jaime asked. “Does her father require proof she is still maiden?”

“You have not heard?” Qyburn gave a shrug. “We had a bird from Lord Selwyn. In answer to mine. The Evenstar offers three hundred dragons for his daughter’s safe return. I had told Lord Vargo there were no sapphires on Tarth, but he will not listen. He is convinced the Evenstar intends to cheat him.”

“Three hundred dragons is a fair ransom for a knight. The goat should take what he can get.”

“The goat is Lord of Harrenhal, and the Lord of Harrenhal does not haggle.”

The news irritated him, though he supposed he should have seen it coming. *The lie spared you awhile, wench. Be grateful for that much.* “If her maidenhead’s as hard as the rest of her, the goat will break his cock off trying to get in,” he jested. Brienne was tough enough to survive a few rapes, Jaime judged, though if she resisted too vigorously Vargo Hoat might start lopping off her hands and feet. *And if he does, why should I care? I might still have a hand if she had let me have my cousin’s sword without getting stupid.* He had almost taken off her leg himself with that first stroke of his, but after that she had given him more than he wanted. *Hoat may not know how freakish strong she is. He had best be careful, or she’ll snap that skinny neck of his, and wouldn’t that be sweet?*

Qyburn’s companionship was wearing on him. Jaime trotted toward the head of the column. A round little tick of a northman name of Nage went before Steelshanks with the peace banner; a rainbow-striped flag with seven long tails, on a staff topped by a seven-pointed star. “Shouldn’t you northmen have a different sort of peace banner?” he asked Walton. “What are the Seven to you?”

“Southern gods,” the man said, “but it’s a southron peace we need, to get you safe to your father.”

My father. Jaime wondered whether Lord Tywin had received the goat’s demand for ransom, with or without his rotted hand. *What is a swordsman worth without his sword hand? Half the gold in Casterly Rock? Three hundred dragons? Or nothing?* His father had never been unduly swayed by sentiment. Tywin Lannister’s own father Lord Tytos had once imprisoned an unruly bannerman, Lord Tarbeck. The redoubtable Lady

Tarbeck responded by capturing three Lannisters, including young Stafford, whose sister was betrothed to cousin Tywin. "Send back my lord and love, or these three shall answer for any harm that comes him," she had written to Casterly Rock. Young Tywin suggested his father oblige by sending back Lord Tarbeck in three pieces. Lord Tytos was a gentler sort of lion, however, so Lady Tarbeck won a few more years for her muttonheaded lord, and Stafford wed and bred and blundered on till Oxcross. But Tywin Lannister endured, eternal as Casterly Rock. *And now you have a cripple for a son as well as a dwarf, my lord. How you will hate that . . .*

The road led them through a burned village. It must have been a year or more since the place had been put to torch. The hovels stood blackened and roofless, but weeds were growing waist high in all the surrounding fields. Steelshanks called a halt to allow them to water the horses. *I know this place too*, Jaime thought as he waited by the well. There had been a small inn where only a few foundation stones and a chimney now stood, and he had gone in for a cup of ale. A dark-eyed serving wench brought him cheese and apples, but the innkeep had refused his coin. "It's an honor to have a knight of the Kingsguard under my roof, ser," the man had said. "It's a tale I'll tell my grandchildren." Jaime looked at the chimney poking out of the weeds and wondered whether he had ever gotten those grandchildren. *Did he tell them the Kingslayer once drank his ale and ate his cheese and apples, or was he ashamed to admit he fed the likes of me?* Not that he would ever know; whoever burned the inn had likely killed the grandchildren as well.

He could feel his phantom fingers clench. When Steelshanks said that perhaps they should have a fire and a bit of food, Jaime shook his head. "I dislike this place. We'll ride on."

By evenfall they had left the lake to follow a rutted track through a wood of oak and elm. Jaime's stump was throbbing dully when Steelshanks decided to make camp. Qyburn had brought a skin of dreamwine, thankfully. While Walton set the watches, Jaime stretched out near the fire and propped a rolled-up bearskin against a stump as a pillow for his head. The wench would have told him he had to eat before he slept, to keep his strength up, but he was more tired than hungry. He closed his eyes, and hoped to dream of Cersei. The fever dreams were all so vivid . . .

Naked and alone he stood, surrounded by enemies, with stone walls all around him pressing close. *The Rock*, he knew. He could feel the immense weight of it above his head. He was home. He was home and whole.

He held his right hand up and flexed his fingers to feel the strength in them. It felt as good as sex. As good as swordplay. *Four fingers and a thumb*. He had dreamed that he was maimed, but it wasn't so. Relief made him dizzy. *My hand, my good hand*. Nothing could hurt him so long as he was whole.

Around him stood a dozen tall dark figures in cowed robes that hid their faces. In their hands were spears. "Who are you?" he demanded of them. "What business do you have in Casterly Rock?"

They gave no answer, only prodded him with the points of their spears. He had no choice but to descend. Down a twisting passageway he went, narrow steps carved from the living rock, down and down. *I must go up*, he told himself. *Up, not down. Why am I going down?* Below the earth his doom awaited, he knew with the certainty of dream; something dark and terrible lurked there, something that wanted him. Jaime tried to halt, but their spears prodded him on. *If only I had my sword, nothing could harm me*.

The steps ended abruptly on echoing darkness. Jaime had the sense of vast space before him. He jerked to a halt, teetering on the edge of nothingness. A spearpoint jabbed at the small of the back, shoving him into the abyss. He shouted, but the fall was short. He landed on his hands and knees, upon soft sand and shallow water. There were watery caverns deep below Casterly Rock, but this one was strange to him. "What place is this?"

"Your place." The voice echoed; it was a hundred voices, a thousand, the voices of all the Lannisters since Lann the Clever, who'd lived at the dawn of days. But most of all it was his father's voice, and beside Lord Tywin stood his sister, pale and beautiful, a torch burning in her hand. Joffrey was there as well, the son they'd made together, and behind them a dozen more dark shapes with golden hair.

"Sister, why has Father brought us here?"

"Us? This is your place, Brother. This is your darkness." Her torch was the only light in the cavern. Her torch was the only light in the world. She

turned to go.

“Stay with me,” Jaime pleaded. “Don’t leave me here alone.” But they were leaving. “*Don’t leave me in the dark!*” Something terrible lived down here. “Give me a sword, at least.”

“I gave you a sword,” Lord Tywin said.

It was at his feet. Jaime groped under the water until his hand closed upon the hilt. *Nothing can hurt me so long as I have a sword.* As he raised the sword a finger of pale flame flickered at the point and crept up along the edge, stopping a hand’s breath from the hilt. The fire took on the color of the steel itself so it burned with a silvery-blue light, and the gloom pulled back. Crouching, listening, Jaime moved in a circle, ready for anything that might come out of the darkness. The water flowed into his boots, ankle deep and bitterly cold. *Beware the water*, he told himself. *There may be creatures living in it, hidden deeps . . .*

From behind came a great splash. Jaime whirled toward the sound . . . but the faint light revealed only Brienne of Tarth, her hands bound in heavy chains. “I swore to keep you safe,” the wench said stubbornly. “I swore an oath.” Naked, she raised her hands to Jaime. “Ser. Please. If you would be so good.”

The steel links parted like silk. “A sword,” Brienne begged, and there it was, scabbard, belt, and all. She buckled it around her thick waist. The light was so dim that Jaime could scarcely see her, though they stood a scant few feet apart. *In this light she could almost be a beauty*, he thought. *In this light she could almost be a knight.* Brienne’s sword took flame as well, burning silvery blue. The darkness retreated a little more.

“The flames will burn so long as you live,” he heard Cersei call. “When they die, so must you.”

“*Sister!*” he shouted. “Stay with me. *Stay!*” There was no reply but the soft sound of retreating footsteps.

Brienne moved her longsword back and forth, watching the silvery flames shift and shimmer. Beneath her feet, a reflection of the burning blade shone on the surface of the flat black water. She was as tall and strong as he remembered, yet it seemed to Jaime that she had more of a woman’s shape now.

“Do they keep a bear down here?” Brienne was moving, slow and wary, sword to hand; step, turn, and listen. Each step made a little splash. “A cave lion? Direwolves? Some bear? Tell me, Jaime. What lives here? What lives in the darkness?”

“Doom.” *No bear*, he knew. *No lion*. “Only doom.”

In the cool silvery-blue light of the swords, the big wench looked pale and fierce. “I mislike this place.”

“I’m not fond of it myself.” Their blades made a little island of light, but all around them stretched a sea of darkness, unending. “My feet are wet.”

“We could go back the way they brought us. If you climbed on my shoulders you’d have no trouble reaching that tunnel mouth.”

Then I could follow Cersei. He could feel himself growing hard at the thought, and turned away so Brienne would not see.

“Listen.” She put a hand on his shoulder, and he trembled at the sudden touch. *She’s warm*. “Something comes.” Brienne lifted her sword to point off to his left. “There.”

He peered into the gloom until he saw it too. Something was moving through the darkness, he could not quite make it out . . .

“A man on a horse. No, two. Two riders, side by side.”

“Down here, beneath the Rock?” It made no sense. Yet there came two riders on pale horses, men and mounts both armored. The destriers emerged from the blackness at a slow walk. *They make no sound*, Jaime realized. *No splashing, no clink of mail nor clop of hoof*. He remembered Eddard Stark, riding the length of Aerys’s throne room wrapped in silence. Only his eyes had spoken; a lord’s eyes, cold and grey and full of judgment.

“Is it you, Stark?” Jaime called. “Come ahead. I never feared you living, I do not fear you dead.”

Brienne touched his arm. “There are more.”

He saw them too. They were armored all in snow, it seemed to him, and ribbons of mist swirled back from their shoulders. The visors of their helms were closed, but Jaime Lannister did not need to look upon their faces to know them.

Five had been his brothers. Oswell Whent and Jon Darry. Lewyn Martell, a prince of Dorne. The White Bull, Gerold Hightower. Ser Arthur Dayne, Sword of the Morning. And beside them, crowned in mist and grief with his long hair streaming behind him, rode Rhaegar Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone and rightful heir to the Iron Throne.

“You don’t frighten me,” he called, turning as they split to either side of him. He did not know which way to face. “I will fight you one by one or all together. But who is there for the wench to duel? She gets cross when you leave her out.”

“I swore an oath to keep him safe,” she said to Rhaegar’s shade. “I swore a holy oath.”

“We all swore oaths,” said Ser Arthur Dayne, so sadly.

The shades dismounted from their ghostly horses. When they drew their longswords, it made not a sound. “He was going to burn the city,” Jaime said. “To leave Robert only ashes.”

“He was your king,” said Darry.

“You swore to keep him safe,” said Whent.

“And the children, them as well,” said Prince Lewyn.

Prince Rhaegar burned with a cold light, now white, now red, now dark. “I left my wife and children in your hands.”

“I never thought he’d hurt them.” Jaime’s sword was burning less brightly now. “I was with the king . . .”

“Killing the king,” said Ser Arthur.

“Cutting his throat,” said Prince Lewyn.

“The king you had sworn to die for,” said the White Bull.

The fires that ran along the blade were guttering out, and Jaime remembered what Cersei had said. *No*. Terror closed a hand about his throat. Then his sword went dark, and only Brienne’s burned, as the ghosts came rushing in.

“No,” he said, “no, no, no. *Noooooooooo!*”

Heart pounding, he jerked awake, and found himself in starry darkness amidst a grove of trees. He could taste bile in his mouth, and he was

shivering with sweat, hot and cold at once. When he looked down for his sword hand, his wrist ended in leather and linen, wrapped snug around an ugly stump. He felt sudden tears well up in his eyes. *I felt it, I felt the strength in my fingers, and the rough leather of the sword's grip. My hand .*

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"My lord." Qyburn knelt beside him, his fatherly face all crinkly with concern. "What is it? I heard you cry out."

Steelshanks Walton stood above them, tall and dour. "What is it? Why did you scream?"

"A dream . . . only a dream." Jaime stared at the camp around him, lost for a moment. "I was in the dark, but I had my hand back." He looked at the stump and felt sick all over again. *There's no place like that beneath the Rock*, he thought. His stomach was sour and empty, and his head was pounding where he'd pillowed it against the stump.

Qyburn felt his brow. "You still have a touch of fever."

"A fever dream." Jaime reached up. "Help me." Steelshanks took him by his good hand and pulled him to his feet.

"Another cup of dreamwine?" asked Qyburn.

"No. I've dreamt enough this night." He wondered how long it was till dawn. Somehow he knew that if he closed his eyes, he would be back in that dark wet place again.

"Milk of the poppy, then? And something for your fever? You are still weak, my lord. You need to sleep. To rest."

That is the last thing I mean to do. The moonlight glimmered pale upon the stump where Jaime had rested his head. The moss covered it so thickly he had not noticed before, but now he saw that the wood was white. It made him think of Winterfell, and Ned Stark's heart tree. *It was not him*, he thought. *It was never him.* But the stump was dead and so was Stark and so were all the others, Prince Rhaegar and Ser Arthur and the children. *And Aerys. Aerys is most dead of all.* "Do you believe in ghosts, Maester?" he asked Qyburn.

The man's face grew strange. "Once, at the Citadel, I came into an empty room and saw an empty chair. Yet I knew a woman had been there, only a

moment before. The cushion was dented where she'd sat, the cloth was still warm, and her scent lingered in the air. If we leave our smells behind us when we leave a room, surely something of our souls must remain when we leave this life?" Qyburn spread his hands. "The archmaesters did not like my thinking, though. Well, Marwyn did, but he was the only one."

Jaime ran his fingers through his hair. "Walton," he said, "saddle the horses. I want to go back."

"Back?" Steelshanks regarded him dubiously.

He thinks I've gone mad. And perhaps I have. "I left something at Harrenhal."

"Lord Vargo holds it now. Him and his Bloody Mummers."

"You have twice the men he does."

"If I don't serve you up to your father as commanded, Lord Bolton will have my hide. We press on to King's Landing."

Once Jaime might have countered with a smile and a threat, but one-handed cripples do not inspire much fear. He wondered what his brother would do. *Tyrion would find a way.* "Lannisters lie, Steelshanks. Didn't Lord Bolton tell you that?"

The man frowned suspiciously. "What if he did?"

"Unless you take me back to Harrenhal, the song I sing my father may not be one the Lord of the Dreadfort would wish to hear. I might even say it was Bolton ordered my hand cut off, and Steelshanks Walton who swung the blade."

Walton gaped at him. "That isn't so."

"No, but who will my father believe?" Jaime made himself smile, the way he used to smile when nothing in the world could frighten him. "It will be so much easier if we just go back. We'd be on our way again soon enough, and I'd sing such a sweet song in King's Landing you'll never believe your ears. You'd get the girl, and a nice fat purse of gold as thanks."

"Gold?" Walton liked that well enough. "How much gold?"

I have him. "Why, how much would you want?"

And by the time the sun came up, they were halfway back to Harrenhal.

Jaime pushed his horse much harder than he had the day before, and Steelshanks and the northmen were forced to match his pace. Even so, it was midday before they reached the castle on the lake. Beneath a darkening sky that threatened rain, the immense walls and five great towers stood black and ominous. *It looks so dead.* The walls were empty, the gates closed and barred. But high above the barbican, a single banner hung limp. *The black goat of Qohor*, he knew. Jaime cupped his hands to shout. “You in there! Open your gates, or I’ll kick them down!”

It was not until Qyburn and Steelshanks added their voices that a head finally appeared on the battlements above them. He goggled down at them, then vanished. A short time later, they heard the portcullis being drawn upward. The gates swung open, and Jaime Lannister spurred his horse through the walls, scarcely glancing at the murder holes as he passed beneath them. He had been worried that the goat might not admit them, but it seemed as if the Brave Companions still thought of them as allies. *Fools.*

The outer ward was deserted; only the long slate-roofed stables showed any signs of life, and it was not horses that interested Jaime just then. He reined up and looked about. He could hear sounds from somewhere behind the Tower of Ghosts, and men shouting in half a dozen tongues. Steelshanks and Qyburn rode up on either side. “Get what you came back for, and we’ll be gone again,” said Walton. “I want no trouble with the Mummerns.”

“Tell your men to keep their hands on their sword hilts, and the Mummerns will want no trouble with you. Two to one, remember?” Jaime’s head jerked round at the sound of a distant roar, faint but ferocious. It echoed off the walls of Harrenhal, and the laughter swelled up like the sea. All of a sudden, he knew what was happening. *Have we come too late?* His stomach did a lurch, and he slammed his spurs into his horse, galloping across the outer ward, beneath an arched stone bridge, around the Wailing Tower, and through the Flowstone Yard.

They had her in the bear pit.

King Harren the Black had wished to do even his bear-baiting in lavish style. The pit was ten yards across and five yards deep, walled in stone, floored with sand, and encircled by six tiers of marble benches. The Brave Companions filled only a quarter of the seats, Jaime saw as he swung down

clumsily from his horse. The sellswords were so fixed on the spectacle beneath that only those across the pit noticed their arrival.

Brienne wore the same ill-fitting gown she'd worn to supper with Roose Bolton. No shield, no breastplate, no chainmail, not even boiled leather, only pink satin and Myrish lace. Maybe the goat thought she was more amusing when dressed as a woman. Half her gown was hanging off in tatters, and her left arm dripped blood where the bear had raked her.

At least they gave her a sword. The wench held it one-handed, moving sideways, trying to put some distance between her and the bear. *That's no good, the ring's too small.* She needed to attack, to make a quick end to it. Good steel was a match for any bear. But the wench seemed afraid to close. The Mummer's showered her with insults and obscene suggestions.

"This is none of our concern," Steelshanks warned Jaime. "Lord Bolton said the wench was theirs, to do with as they liked."

"Her name's Brienne." Jaime descended the steps, past a dozen startled sellswords. Vargo Hoat had taken the lord's box in the lowest tier. "Lord Vargo," he called over the shouts.

The Qohorik almost spilt his wine. "*Kingthlayer?*" The left side of his face was bandaged clumsily, the linen over his ear spotted with blood.

"Pull her out of there."

"Thay out of thith, Kingthlayer, unleth you'd like another thump." He waved a wine cup. "Your thee-mooth bit oth my ear. Thmall wonder her father will not ranthom thuch a freak."

A roar turned Jaime back around. The bear was eight feet tall. *Gregor Clegane with a pelt*, he thought, *though likely smarter.* The beast did not have the reach the Mountain had with that monster greatsword of his, though.

Bellowing in fury, the bear showed a mouth full of great yellow teeth, then fell back to all fours and went straight at Brienne. *There's your chance*, Jaime thought. *Strike! Now!*

Instead, she poked out ineffectually with the point of her blade. The bear recoiled, then came on, rumbling. Brienne slid to her left and poked again at the bear's face. This time he lifted a paw to swat the sword aside.

He's wary, Jaime realized. He's gone up against other men. He knows swords and spears can hurt him. But that won't keep him off her long. "Kill him!" he shouted, but his voice was lost amongst all the other shouts. If Brienne heard, she gave no sign. She moved around the pit, keeping the wall at her back. *Too close. If the bear pins her by the wall . . .*

The beast turned clumsily, too far and too fast. Quick as a cat, Brienne changed direction. *There's the wench I remember.* She leapt in to land a cut across the bear's back. Roaring, the bear went up on his hind legs again. Brienne scrambled back away. *Where's the blood?* Then suddenly he understood. Jaime rounded on Hoat. "You gave her a tourney sword."

The goat brayed laughter, spraying him with wine and spittle. "Of courth."

"*I'll* pay her bloody ransom. Gold, sapphires, whatever you want. Pull her out of there."

"You want her? Go get her."

So he did.

He put his good hand on the marble rail and vaulted over, rolling as he hit the sand. The bear turned at the *thump*, sniffing, watching this new intruder warily. Jaime scrambled to one knee. *Well, what in seven hells do I do now?* He filled his fist with sand. "Kingslayer?" he heard Brienne say, astonished.

"Jaime." He uncoiled, flinging the sand at the bear's face. The bear mauled the air and roared like blazes.

"What are you *doing* here?"

"Something stupid. Get behind me." He circled toward her, putting himself between Brienne and the bear.

"*You* get behind. I have the sword."

"A sword with no point and no edge. *Get behind me!*" He saw something half-buried in the sand, and snatched it up with his good hand. It proved to be a human jawbone, with some greenish flesh still clinging to it, crawling with maggots. *Charming*, he thought, wondering whose face he held. The bear was edging closer, so Jaime whipped his arm around and flung bone, meat, and maggots at the beast's head. He missed by a good yard. *I ought to lop my left hand off as well, for all the good it does me.*

Brienne tried to dart around, but he kicked her legs out from under her. She fell in the sand, clutching the useless sword. Jaime straddled her, and the bear came charging.

There was a deep *twang*, and a feathered shaft sprouted suddenly beneath the beast's left eye. Blood and slaver ran from his open mouth, and another bolt took him in the leg. The bear roared, reared. He saw Jaime and Brienne again and lumbered toward them. More crossbows fired, the quarrels ripping through fur and flesh. At such short range, the bowmen could hardly miss. The shafts hit as hard as maces, but the bear took another step. *The poor dumb brave brute*. When the bear swiped at him, he danced aside, shouting, kicking sand. The bear turned to follow his tormentor, and took another two quarrels in the back. He gave one last rumbling growl, settled back onto his haunches, stretched out on the bloodstained sand, and died.

Brienne got back to her knees, clutching the sword and breathing short ragged breaths. Steelshanks's archers were winding their crossbows and reloading while the Bloody Mummerys shouted curses and threats at them. Rorge and Three Toes had swords out, Jaime saw, and Zollo was uncoiling his whip.

"You thlew my bear!" Vargo Hoat shrieked.

"And I'll serve you the same if you give me trouble," Steelshanks threw back. "We're taking the wench."

"Her name is Brienne," Jaime said. "Brienne, the maid of Tarth. You *are* still maiden, I hope?"

Her broad homely face turned red. "Yes."

"Oh, good," Jaime said. "I only rescue maidens." To Hoat he said, "You'll have your ransom. For both of us. A Lannister pays his debts. Now fetch some ropes and get us out of here."

"Bugger that," Rorge growled. "Kill them, Hoat. Or you'll bloody well wish you had!"

The Qohorik hesitated. Half his men were drunk, the northmen stone sober, and there were twice as many. Some of the crossbowmen had

reloaded by now. “Pull them out,” Hoat said, and then, to Jaime, “I hath chothen to be merthiful. Tell your lord father.”

“I will, my lord.” *Not that it will do you any good.*

Not until they were half a league from Harrenhal and out of range of archers on the walls did Steelshanks Walton let his anger show. “Are you *mad*, Kingslayer? Did you mean to die? No man can fight a bear with his bare hands!”

“One bare hand and one bare stump,” Jaime corrected. “But I hoped you’d kill the beast before the beast killed me. Elsewise, Lord Bolton would have peeled you like an orange, no?”

Steelshanks cursed him roundly for a fool of Lannister, spurred his horse, and galloped away up the column.

“Ser Jaime?” Even in soiled pink satin and torn lace, Brienne looked more like a man in a gown than a proper woman. “I am grateful, but . . . you were well away. Why come back?”

A dozen quips came to mind, each crueler than the one before, but Jaime only shrugged. “I dreamed of you,” he said.