

## JAIME

The fields outside the walls of Darry were being tilled once more. The burned crops had been plowed under, and Ser Addam's scouts reported seeing women in the furrows pulling weeds, whilst a team of oxen broke new ground on the edge of a nearby wood. A dozen bearded men with axes stood guard over them as they worked.

By the time Jaime and his column reached the castle, all of them had fled within the walls. He found Darry closed to him, just as Harrenhal had been. *A chilly welcome from mine own blood.*

"Sound the horn," he commanded. Ser Kennos of Kayce unslung the Horn of Herrock and let it wind. As he waited for a response from the castle, Jaime eyed the banner floating brown and crimson above his cousin's barbican. Lancel had taken to quartering the lion of Lannister with the Darry plowman, it would seem. He saw his uncle's hand in that, as in Lancel's choice of bride. House Darry had ruled these lands since the Andals cast down the First Men. No doubt Ser Kevan realized that his son would have an easier time of it if the peasants saw him as a continuation of the old line, holding these lands by right of marriage rather than royal decree. *Kevan should be Tommen's Hand. Harys Swyft is a toad, and my sister is a fool if she thinks otherwise.*

The castle gates swung open slowly. "My coz will not have room to accommodate a thousand men," Jaime told Strongboar. "We'll make camp beneath the western wall. I want the perimeters ditched and staked. There are still bands of outlaws in these parts."

"They'd need to be mad to attack a force as strong as ours."

"Mad or starving." Until he had a better notion of these outlaws and their strength, Jaime was not inclined to take any risks with his defenses. "Ditched and staked," he said again, before spurring Honor toward the gate. Ser Dermot rode beside him with the royal stag and lion, and Ser Hugo Vance with the white standard of the Kingsguard. Jaime had charged Red

Ronnet with the task of delivering Wylis Manderly to Maidenpool, so he would not need to look on him henceforth.

Pia rode with Jaime's squires, on the gelding Peck had found for her. "It's like some toy castle," Jaime heard her say. *She's known no home but Harrenhal*, he reflected. *Every castle in the realm will seem small to her, except the Rock*.

Josmyn Peckleton was saying the same thing. "You must not judge by Harrenhal. Black Harren built too big." Pia listened as solemnly as a girl of five being lessoned by her septa. *That's all she is, a little girl in a woman's body, scarred and scared*. Peck was taken with her, though. Jaime suspected that the boy had never known a woman, and Pia was still pretty enough, so long as she kept her mouth closed. *There's no harm in him bedding her, I suppose, so long as she's willing*.

One of the Mountain's men had tried to rape the girl at Harrenhal, and had seemed honestly perplexed when Jaime commanded Ilyn Payne to take his head off. "I had her before, a hunnerd times," he kept saying as they forced him to his knees. "A hunnerd times, m'lord. We all had her." When Ser Ilyn presented Pia with his head, she had smiled through her ruined teeth.

Darry had changed hands several times during the fighting, and its castle had been burned once and sacked at least twice, but Lancel had seemingly wasted little time setting things to rights. The castle gates were newly hung, raw oaken planks reinforced with iron studs. A new stable was going up where an older one had been put to the torch. The steps to the keep had been replaced, and the shutters on many of the windows. Blackened stones showed where the flames had licked, but time and rain would fade those.

Within the walls, crossbowmen walked the ramparts, some in crimson cloaks and lion-crested helms, others in the blue and grey of House Frey. As Jaime trotted across the yard, chickens ran out from under Honor's hooves, sheep bleated, and peasants stared at him with sullen eyes. *Armed peasants*, he did not fail to note. Some had scythes, some staves, some hoes sharpened to cruel points. There were axes in evidence as well, and he spied

several bearded men with red, seven-pointed stars sewn onto ragged, filthy tunics. *More bloody sparrows. Where do they all come from?*

Of his uncle Kevan he saw no sign. Nor of Lancel. Only a maester emerged to greet him, with a grey robe flapping about his skinny legs. “Lord Commander, Darry is honored by this... unexpected visit. You must forgive our lack of preparations. We had been given to understand that you were bound for Riverrun.”

“Darry was on my way,” lied Jaime. *Riverrun will keep.* And if perchance the siege had ended before he reached the castle, he would be spared the need to take up arms against House Tully.

Dismounting, he handed Honor to a stableboy. “Will I find my uncle here?” He did not supply a name. Ser Kevan was the only uncle he had left, the last surviving son of Tytos Lannister.

“No, my lord. Ser Kevan took his leave of us after the wedding.” The maester pulled at the chain collar, as if it had grown too tight for him. “I know Lord Lancel will be pleased to see you and... and all your gallant knights. Though it pains me to confess that Darry cannot feed so many.”

“We have our own provisions. You are?”

“Maester Ottomore, if it please my lord. Lady Amerei wished to welcome you herself, but she is seeing to the preparation of a feast in your honor. It is her hope that you and your chief knights and captains will join us at table this evening.”

“A hot meal would be most welcome. The days have been cold and wet.” Jaime glanced about the yard, at the bearded faces of the sparrows. *Too many. And too many Freys as well.* “Where will I find Hardstone?”

“We had a report of outlaws beyond the Trident. Ser Harwyn took five knights and twenty archers and went to deal with them.”

“And Lord Lancel?”

“He is at his prayers. His lordship has commanded us never to disturb him when he is praying.”

*He and Ser Bonifer should get on well.* “Very well.” There would be time enough to talk with his cousin later. “Show me to my chambers and

have a bath brought up.”

“If it please my lord, we have put you in the Plowman’s Keep. I will show you there.”

“I know the way.” Jaime was no stranger to this castle. He and Cersei had been guests here twice before, once on their way to Winterfell with Robert, and again on the way back to King’s Landing. Though small as castles went, it was larger than an inn, with good hunting along the river. Robert Baratheon had never been never loath to impose upon the hospitality of his subjects.

The keep was much as he recalled it. “The walls are still bare,” Jaime observed as the maester led him down a gallery.

“Lord Lancel hopes one day to cover them with hangings,” said Ottomore. “Scenes of piety and devotion.”

*Piety and devotion.* It was all he could do not to laugh. The walls had been bare on his first visit too. Tyrion had pointed out the squares of darker stone where tapestries had once hung. Ser Raymun could remove the hangings, but not the marks they’d left. Later, the Imp had slipped a handful of stags to one of Darry’s serving men for the key to the cellar where the missing tapestries were hidden. He showed them to Jaime by the light of a candle, grinning; woven portraits of all the Targaryen kings, from the first Aegon to the second Aenys. “If I tell Robert, mayhaps he’ll make *me* Lord of Darry,” the dwarf said, chortling.

Maester Ottomore led Jaime to the top of the keep. “I trust you will be comfortable here, my lord. There is a privy, when nature calls. Your window looks out upon the godswood. The bedchamber adjoins her ladyship’s, with a servant’s cell between.”

“These were Lord Darry’s own apartments.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“My cousin is too kind. I did not intend to put Lancel out of his own bedchamber.”

“Lord Lancel has been sleeping in the sept.”

Sleeping with the Mother and the Maiden, when he has a warm wife just through that door? Jaime did not know whether to laugh or weep. Maybe he is praying for his cock to harden. In King's Landing it had been rumored that Lancel's wounds had left him incapable. Still, he ought to have sense enough to try. His cousin's hold on his new lands would not be secure until he fathered a son on his half-Darry wife. Jaime had begun to rue the impulse that had brought him here. He gave thanks to Ottomore, reminded him about the bath, and had Peck see him out.

The lord's bedchamber had changed since his last visit, and not for the better. Old stale rushes covered the floor in place of the fine Myrish carpet that had been there previously, and all the furnishings were new and crudely made. Ser Raymun Darry's bed had been large enough to sleep six, with brown velvet draperies and oakwood posts carved with vines and leaves; Lancel's was a lumpy straw pallet, placed beneath the window where the first light of day would be sure to wake him. The other bed had no doubt been burned or smashed or stolen, but even so...

When the tub arrived, Little Lew pulled off Jaime's boots and helped remove his golden hand. Peck and Garrett hauled water, and Pia found him something clean to sup in. The girl glanced at him shyly as she shook his doublet out. Jaime was uncomfortably aware of the curve of hip and breast beneath her roughspun brown dress. He found himself remembering the things that Pia had whispered to him at Harrenhal, the night that Qyburn sent her to his bed. *Sometimes when I'm with some man, she'd said, I close my eyes and pretend it's you on top of me.*

He was grateful when the bath was deep enough to conceal his arousal. As he lowered himself into the steaming water, he recalled another bath, the one he'd shared with Brienne. He had been feverish and weak from loss of blood, and the heat had made him so dizzy he found himself saying things better left unsaid. This time he had no such excuse. *Remember your vows. Pia is more fit for Tyrion's bed than yours.* "Fetch me soap and a stiff brush," he told Peck. "Pia, you may leave us."

"Aye, m'lord. Thank you, m'lord." She covered her mouth when she spoke, to hide her broken teeth.

“Do you want her?” Jaime asked Peck, when she was gone.

The squire turned beet red.

“If she’ll have you, take her. She’ll teach you a few things you’ll find useful on your wedding night, I don’t doubt, and you’re not like to get a bastard by her.” Pia had spread her legs for half his father’s army and never quickened; most like the girl was barren. “If you bed her, though, be kind to her.”

“Kind, my lord? How... how would I...?”

“Sweet words. Gentle touches. You don’t want to wed her, but so long as you’re abed treat her as you would your bride.”

The lad nodded. “My lord, I... where should I take her? There’s never a place to... to...”

“...to be alone?” Jaime grinned. “We’ll be at supper several hours. The straw looks lumpy, but it should serve.”

Peck’s eyes grew wide. “His lordship’s bed?”

“You’ll feel a lord yourself when you’re done, if Pia knows her business.” *And someone ought to make some use of that miserable straw mattress.*

When he descended for the feast that night, Jaime Lannister wore a doublet of red velvet slashed with cloth-of-gold, and a golden chain studded with black diamonds. He had strapped on his golden hand as well, polished to a fine bright sheen. This was no fit place to wear his whites. His duty awaited him at Riverrun; a darker need had brought him here.

Darry’s great hall was great only by courtesy. Trestle tables crowded it from wall to wall, and the ceiling rafters were black with smoke. Jaime had been seated on the dais, to the right of Lancel’s empty chair. “Will my cousin not be joining us for supper?” he asked as he sat down.

“My lord prefers to fast,” said Lancel’s wife, the Lady Amerei. “He’s sick with grief for the poor High Septon.” She was a long-legged, full-breasted, strapping girl of some eight-and-ten years; a healthy wench to look at her, though her pinched, chinless face reminded Jaime of his late

and unlamented cousin Cleos, who had always looked somewhat like a weasel.

*Fasting? He is an even bigger fool than I suspected.* His cousin should be busy fathering a little weasel-faced heir on his widow instead of starving himself to death. He wondered what Ser Kevan might have had to say about his son's new fervor. Could that be the reason for his uncle's abrupt departure?

Over bowls of bean-and-bacon soup Lady Amerei told Jaime how her first husband had been slain by Ser Gregor Clegane when the Freys were still fighting for Robb Stark. "I begged him not to go, but my Pate was oh so *very* brave, and swore he was the man to slay that monster. He wanted to make a great name for himself."

*We all do.* "When I was a squire I told myself I'd be the man to slay the Smiling Knight."

"The Smiling Knight?" She sounded lost. "Who was that?"

The Mountain of my boyhood. Half as big but twice as mad.

"An outlaw, long dead. No one who need concern your ladyship."

Amerei's lip trembled. Tears rolled from her brown eyes.

"You must forgive my daughter," said an older woman. Lady Amerei had brought a score of Freys to Darry with her; a sister, an uncle, a half uncle, various cousins... and her mother, who had been born a Darry. "She still grieves for her father."

"Outlaws *killed* him," sobbed Lady Amerei. "Father had only gone out to ransom Petyr Pimple. He brought them the gold they asked for, but they hung him anyway."

*Hanged*, Ami. Your father was not a tapestry." Lady Mariya turned back to Jaime. "I believe you knew him, ser."

"We were squires together once, at Crakehall." He would not go so far as to claim they had been friends. When Jaime had arrived, Merrett Frey had been the castle bully, lording it over all the younger boys. *Then he tried to bully me.* "He was... very strong." It was the only praise that came to mind. Merrett had been slow and clumsy and stupid, but he *was* strong.

“You fought against the Kingswood Brotherhood together,” sniffed Lady Amerei. “Father used to tell me stories.”

*Father used to boast and lie, you mean.* “We did.” Frey’s chief contributions to the fight had consisted of contracting the pox from a camp follower and getting himself captured by the White Fawn. The outlaw queen burned her sigil into his arse before ransoming him back to Sumner Crakehall. Merrett had not been able to sit down for a fortnight, though Jaime doubted that the red-hot iron was half so nasty as the kettles of shit his fellow squires made him eat once he was returned. *Boys are the cruelest creatures on the earth.* He slipped his golden hand around his wine cup and raised it up. “To Merrett’s memory,” he said. It was easier to drink to the man than to talk of him.

After the toast Lady Amerei stopped weeping and the table talk turned to wolves, of the four-footed kind. Ser Danwell Frey claimed there were more of them about than even his grandfather could remember. “They’ve lost all fear of men. Packs of them attacked our baggage train on our way down from the Twins. Our archers had to feather a dozen before the others fled.” Ser Addam Marbrand confessed that their own column had faced similar troubles on their way up from King’s Landing.

Jaime concentrated on the fare before him, tearing off chunks of bread with his left hand and fumbling at his wine cup with his right. He watched Addam Marbrand charm the girl beside him, watched Steffon Swyft refight the battle for King’s Landing with bread and nuts and carrots. Ser Kennos pulled a serving girl into his lap, urging her to stroke his horn, whilst Ser Dermot regaled some squires with tales of knight errantry in the rainwood. Farther down the table Hugo Vance had closed his eyes. *Brooding on the mysteries of life*, thought Jaime. *That, or napping between courses.* He turned back to Lady Mariya. “The outlaws who killed your husband... was it Lord Beric’s band?”

“So we thought, at first.” Though Lady Mariya’s hair was streaked with grey, she was still a handsome woman. “The killers scattered when they left Oldstones. Lord Vypren tracked one band to Fairmarket, but lost them there. Black Walder led hounds and hunters into Hag’s Mire after the others.



The peasants denied seeing them, but when questioned sharply they sang a different song. They spoke of a one-eyed man and another who wore a yellow cloak... and a woman, cloaked and hooded.”

“A woman?” He would have thought that the White Fawn would have taught Merrett to stay clear of outlaw wenches. “There was a woman in the Kingswood Brotherhood as well.”

“I know of her.” *How not*, her tone suggested, *when she left her mark upon my husband?* “The White Fawn was young and fair, they say. This hooded woman is neither. The peasants would have us believe that her face was torn and scarred, and her eyes terrible to look upon. They claim she led the outlaws.”

“Led them?” Jaime found that hard to believe. “Beric Dondarrion and the red priest...”

“...were not seen.” Lady Mariya sounded certain.

“Dondarrion’s dead,” said Strongboar. “The Mountain drove a knife through his eye, we have men with us who saw it.”

“That’s one tale,” said Addam Marbrand. “Others will tell you that Lord Beric can’t be killed.”

“Ser Harwyn says those tales are lies.” Lady Amerei wound a braid around her finger. “He has promised me Lord Beric’s head. He’s very gallant.” She was blushing beneath her tears.

Jaime thought back on the head he’d given to Pia. He could almost hear his little brother chuckle. *Whatever became of giving women flowers?* Tyrion might have asked. He would have had a few choice words for Harwyn Plumm as well, though *gallant* would not have been one of them. Plumm’s brothers were big, fleshy fellows with thick necks and red faces; loud and lusty, quick to laugh, quick to anger, quick to forgive. Harwyn was a different sort of Plumm; hard-eyed and taciturn, unforgiving... and deadly, with his hammer in his hand. A good man to command a garrison, but not a man to love. *Although...* Jaime gazed at Lady Amerei.

The serving men were bringing out the fish course, a river pike baked in a crust of herbs and crushed nuts. Lancel’s lady tasted it, approved, and

commanded that the first portion be served to Jaime. As they set the fish before him, she leaned across her husband's place to touch his golden hand. "You could kill Lord Beric, Ser Jaime. You slew the Smiley Knight. Please, my lord, I beg you, stay and help us with Lord Beric and the Hound." Her pale fingers caressed his golden ones.

*Does she think that I can feel that?* "The Sword of the Morning slew the Smiling Knight, my lady. Ser Arthur Dayne, a better knight than me." Jaime pulled back his golden fingers and turned once more to Lady Mariya. "How far did Black Walder track this hooded woman and her men?"

"His hounds picked up their scent again north of Hag's Mire," the older woman told him. "He swears that he was no more than half a day behind them when they vanished into the Neck."

"Let them rot there," declared Ser Kennos cheerfully. "If the gods are good, they'll be swallowed up in quicksand or gobbled down by lizard-lions."

"Or taken in by frog eaters," said Ser Danwell Frey. "I would not put it past the crannogmen to shelter outlaws."

"Would that it were only them," said Lady Mariya. "Some of the river lords are hand in glove with Lord Beric's men as well."

"The smallfolk too," sniffed her daughter. "Ser Harwyn says they hide them and feed them, and when he asks where they've gone, they lie. They *lie* to their own lords!"

"Have their tongues out," urged Strongboar.

"Good luck getting answers then," said Jaime. "If you want their help, you need to make them love you. That was how Arthur Dayne did it, when we rode against the Kingswood Brotherhood. He paid the smallfolk for the food we ate, brought their grievances to King Aerys, expanded the grazing lands around their villages, even won them the right to fell a certain number of trees each year and take a few of the king's deer during the autumn. The forest folk had looked to Toyne to defend them, but Ser Arthur did more for them than the Brotherhood could ever hope to do, and won them to our side. After that, the rest was easy."

“The Lord Commander speaks wisely,” said Lady Mariya. “We shall never be rid of these outlaws until the smallfolk come to love Lancel as much as they once loved my father and grandfather.”

Jaime glanced at his cousin’s empty place. Lancel will never win their love by praying, though.

Lady Amerei put on a pout. “Ser Jaime, I pray you, do not abandon us. My lord has need of you, and so do I. These are such fearful times. Some nights I can hardly sleep, for fear.”

“My place is with the king, my lady.”

“I’ll come,” offered Strongboar. “Once we’re done at Riverrun, I’ll be itching for another fight. Not that Beric Dondarrion is like to give me one. I recall the man from tourneys past. A comely lad in a pretty cloak, he was. Slight and callow.”

“That was before he died,” said young Ser Arwood Frey. “Death changed him, the smallfolk say. You can kill him, but he won’t stay dead. How do you fight a man like that? And there’s the Hound as well. He slew twenty men at Saltpans.”

Strongboar guffawed. “Twenty fat innkeeps, maybe. Twenty serving men pissing in their breeches. Twenty begging brothers armed with bowls. Not twenty knights. Not *me*.”

“There is a knight at Saltpans,” Ser Arwood insisted. “He hid behind his walls whilst Clegane and his mad dogs ravaged through his town. You have not seen the things he did, ser. I have. When the reports reached the Twins, I rode down with Harys Haigh and his brother Donnel and half a hundred men, archers and men-at-arms. We thought it was Lord Beric’s work, and hoped to find his trail. All that remains of Saltpans is the castle, and old Ser Quincy so frightened he would not open his gates, but shouted down at us from his battlements. The rest is bones and ashes. A whole town. The Hound put the buildings to the torch and the people to the sword and rode off laughing. The women... you would not believe what he did to some of the women. I will not speak of it at table. It made me sick to see.”

“I cried when I heard,” said Lady Amerei.

Jaime sipped his wine. “What makes you certain it was the Hound?” What they were describing sounded more like Gregor’s work than Sandor’s. Sandor had been hard and brutal, yes, but it was his big brother who was the real monster in House Clegane.

“He was seen,” Ser Arwood said. “That helm of his is not easily mistaken, nor forgotten, and there were a few who survived to tell the tale. The girl he raped, some boys who hid, a woman we found trapped beneath a blackened beam, the fisherfolk who watched the butchery from their boats...”

“Do not call it butchery,” Lady Mariya said softly. “That gives insult to honest butchers everywhere. Salt pans was the work of some fell beast in human skin.”

This is a time for beasts, Jaime reflected, for lions and wolves and angry dogs, for ravens and carrion crows.

“Evil work.” Strongboar filled his cup again. “Lady Mariya, Lady Amerei, your distress has moved me. You have my word, once Riverrun has fallen I shall return to hunt down the Hound and kill him for you. Dogs do not frighten me.”

*This one should.* Both men were large and powerful, but Sandor Clegane was much quicker, and fought with a savagery that Lyle Crakehall could not hope to match.

Lady Amerei was thrilled, however. “You are a true knight, Ser Lyle, to help a lady in distress.”

*At least she did not call herself “a maiden.”* Jaime reached for his cup and knocked it over. The linen tablecloth drank the wine. As the red stain spread, his companions all pretended not to notice. *High table courtesy*, he told himself, but it tasted just like pity. He rose abruptly. “My lady. Pray excuse me.”

Lady Amerei looked stricken. “Would you leave us? There’s venison to come, and capons stuffed with leeks and mushrooms.”

“Very fine, no doubt, but I could not eat another bite. I need to see my cousin.” Bowing, Jaime left them to their food.

Men were eating in the yard as well. The sparrows had gathered round a dozen cookfires to warm their hands against the chill of dusk and watch fat sausages spit and sizzle above the flames. There had to be a hundred of them. *Useless mouths*. Jaime wondered how many sausages his cousin had laid by and how he intended to feed the sparrows once they were gone. *They will be eating rats by winter, unless they can get a harvest in*. This late in autumn, the chances of another harvest were not good.

He found the sept off the castle's inner ward; a windowless, seven-sided, half-timbered building with carved wood doors and a tiled roof. Three sparrows sat upon its steps. When Jaime approached, they rose. "Where you going, m'lord?" asked one. He was the smallest of the three, but he had the biggest beard.

"Inside."

"His lordship's in there, praying."

"His lordship is my cousin."

"Well, then, m'lord," said a different sparrow, a huge bald man with a seven-pointed star painted over one eye, "you won't want to bother your cousin at his prayers."

"Lord Lancel is asking the Father Above for guidance," said the third sparrow, the beardless one. A boy, Jaime had thought, but her voice marked her for a woman, dressed in shapeless rags and a shirt of rusted mail. "He is praying for the soul of the High Septon and all the others who have died."

"They'll still be dead tomorrow," Jaime told her. "The Father Above has more time than I do. Do you know who I am?"

"Some lord," said the big man with the starry eye.

"Some cripple," said the small one with the big beard.

"The Kingslayer," said the woman, "but we're no kings, just Poor Fellows, and you can't go in unless his lordship says you can." She hefted a spiked club, and the small man raised an axe.

The doors behind them opened. "Let my cousin pass in peace, friends," Lancel said softly. "I have been expecting him."

The sparrows moved aside.

Lancel looked even thinner than he had at King's Landing. He was barefoot, and dressed in a plain, roughspun tunic of undyed wool that made him look more like a beggar than a lord. The crown of his head had been shaved smooth, but his beard had grown out a little. To call it peach fuzz would have given insult to the peach. It went queerly with the white hair around his ears.

"Cousin," said Jaime when they were alone within the sept, "have you lost your bloody wits?"

"I prefer to say I've found my faith."

"Where is your father?"

"Gone. We quarreled." Lancel knelt before the altar of his other Father. "Will you pray with me, Jaime?"

"If I pray nicely, will the Father give me a new hand?"

"No. But the Warrior will give you courage, the Smith will lend you strength, and the Crone will give you wisdom."

"It's a hand I need." The seven gods loomed above carved altars, the dark wood gleaming in the candlelight. A faint smell of incense hung in the air. "You sleep down here?"

"Each night I make my bed beneath a different altar, and the Seven send me visions."

Baelor the Blessed once had visions too. *Especially when he was fasting.* "How long has it been since you've eaten?"

"My faith is all the nourishment I need."

"Faith is like porridge. Better with milk and honey."

"I dreamed that you would come. In the dream you knew what I had done. How I'd sinned. You killed me for it."

"You're more like to kill yourself with all this fasting. Didn't Baelor the Blessed fast himself onto a bier?"

"Our lives are candle flames, says *The Seven-Pointed Star*. Any errant puff of wind can snuff us out. Death is never far in this world, and seven hells await sinners who do not repent their sins. Pray with me, Jaime."

“If I do, will you eat a bowl of porridge?” When his coz did not answer, Jaime sighed. “You should be sleeping with your wife, not with the Maid. You need a son with Darry blood if you want to keep this castle.”

“A pile of cold stones. I never asked for it. I never wanted it. I only wanted...” Lancel shuddered. “Seven save me, but I wanted to be you.”

Jaime had to laugh. “Better me than Blessed Baelor. Darry needs a lion, coz. So does your little Frey. She gets moist between the legs every time someone mentions Hardstone. If she hasn’t bedded him yet, she will soon.”

“If she loves him, I wish them joy of one another.”

“A lion shouldn’t have horns. You took the girl to wife.”

“I said some words and gave her a red cloak, but only to please Father. Marriage requires consummation. King Baelor was made to wed his sister Daena, but they never lived as man and wife, and he put her aside as soon as he was crowned.”

“The realm would have been better served if he had closed his eyes and fucked her. I know enough history to know that. In any case, you’re not like to be taken for Baelor the Blessed.”

“No,” Lancel allowed. “He was a rare spirit, pure and brave and innocent, untouched by all the evils of the world. I am a sinner, with much and more to atone for.”

Jaime put his hand on his cousin’s shoulder. “What do you know of sin, coz? I killed my king.”

“The brave man slays with a sword, the craven with a wineskin. We are both kingslayers, ser.”

“Robert was no true king. Some might even say that a stag is a lion’s natural prey.” Jaime could feel the bones beneath his cousin’s skin... and something else as well. Lancel was wearing a hair shirt underneath his tunic. “What else did you do, to require so much atonement? Tell me.”

His cousin bowed his head, tears running down his cheeks.

Those tears were all the answer Jaime needed. “You killed the king,” he said, “then you fucked the queen.”

“I never...”

“...lay with my sweet sister?” *Say it. Say it!*

“Never spilled my seed in... in her...”

“...cunt?” suggested Jaime.

“...womb,” Lancel finished. “It is not treason unless you finish inside. I gave her comfort, after the king died. You were a captive, your father was in the field, and your brother... she was afraid of him, and with good reason. He made me betray her.”

“Did he?” Lancel and Ser Osmund and how many more? Was the part about Moon Boy just a gibe? “Did you force her?”

“*No!* I loved her. I wanted to protect her.”

*You wanted to be me.* His phantom fingers itched. The day his sister had come to White Sword Tower to beg him to renounce his vows, she had laughed after he refused her and boasted of having lied to him a thousand times. Jaime had taken that for a clumsy attempt to hurt him as he’d hurt her. *It may have been the only true thing that she ever said to me.*

“Do not think ill of the queen,” Lancel pleaded. “All flesh is weak, Jaime. No harm came of our sin. No... no bastard.”

“No. Bastards are seldom made upon the belly.” He wondered what his cousin would say if he were to confess his own sins, the three treasons Cersei had named Joffrey, Tommen, and Myrcella.

“I was angry with Her Grace after the battle, but the High Septon said I must forgive her.”

“You confessed your sins to His High Holiness, did you?”

“He prayed for me when I was wounded. He was a good man.”

*He’s a dead man. They rang the bells for him.* He wondered if his cousin had any notion what fruit his words had borne. “Lancel, you’re a bloody fool.”

“You are not wrong,” said Lancel, “but my folly is behind me, ser. I have asked the Father Above to show me the way, and he has. I am renouncing this lordship and this wife. Hardstone is welcome to the both of



them, if he likes. On the morrow I will return to King's Landing and swear my sword to the new High Septon and the Seven. I mean to take vows and join the Warrior's Sons."

The boy was not making sense. "The Warrior's Sons were proscribed three hundred years ago."

"The new High Septon has revived them. He's sent out a call for worthy knights to pledge their lives and swords to the service of the Seven. The Poor Fellows are to be restored as well."

"Why would the Iron Throne allow that?" One of the early Targaryen kings had fought for years to suppress the two military orders, Jaime recalled, though he did not remember which. Maegor, perhaps, or the first Jaehaerys. *Tyrion would have known.*

"His High Holiness writes that King Tommen has given his consent. I will show you the letter, if you like."

"Even if this is true... you are a lion of the Rock, a *lord*. You have a wife, a castle, lands to defend, people to protect. If the gods are good, you will have sons of your blood to follow you. Why would you throw all that away for... for some vow?"

"Why did you?" asked Lancel softly.

*For honor*, Jaime might have said. *For glory*. That would have been a lie, though. Honor and glory had played their parts, but most of it had been for Cersei. A laugh escaped his lips. "Is it the High Septon you're running to, or my sweet sister? Pray on that one, coz. Pray *hard*."

"Will you pray with me, Jaime?"

He glanced about the sept, at the gods. The Mother, full of mercy. The Father, stern in judgment. The Warrior, one hand upon his sword. The Stranger in the shadows, his half-human face concealed beneath a hooded mantle. *I thought that I was the Warrior and Cersei was the Maid, but all the time she was the Stranger, hiding her true face from my gaze.* "Pray for me, if you like," he told his cousin. "I've forgotten all the words."

The sparrows were still fluttering about the steps when Jaime stepped back out into the night. "Thank you," he told them. "I feel ever so much

holier now.”

He went and found Ser Ilyn and a pair of swords.

The castle yard was full of eyes and ears. To escape them, they sought out Darry’s godswood. There were no sparrows there, only trees bare and brooding, their black branches scratching at the sky. A mat of dead leaves crunched beneath their feet.

“Do you see that window, ser?” Jaime used a sword to point. “That was Raymun Darry’s bedchamber. Where King Robert slept, on our return from Winterfell. Ned Stark’s daughter had run off after her wolf savaged Joff, you’ll recall. My sister wanted the girl to lose a hand. The old penalty, for striking one of the blood royal. Robert told her she was cruel and mad. They fought for half the night... well, Cersei fought, and Robert drank. Past midnight, the queen summoned me inside. The king was passed out snoring on the Myrish carpet. I asked my sister if she wanted me to carry him to bed. She told me I should carry her to bed, and shrugged out of her robe. I took her on Raymun Darry’s bed after stepping over Robert. If His Grace had woken I would have killed him there and then. He would not have been the first king to die upon my sword... but you know that story, don’t you?” He slashed at a tree branch, shearing it in half. “As I was fucking her, Cersei cried, ‘*I want.*’ I thought that she meant me, but it was the Stark girl that she wanted, maimed or dead.” *The things I do for love.* “It was only by chance that Stark’s own men found the girl before me. If I had come on her first...”

The pockmarks on Ser Ilyn’s face were black holes in the torchlight, as dark as Jaime’s soul. He made that clacking sound.

*He is laughing at me,* realized Jaime Lannister. “For all I know you fucked my sister too, you pock-faced bastard,” he spat out. “Well, shut your bloody mouth and kill me if you can.”