

## JAIME

Ser Jaime Lannister, all in white, stood beside his father's bier, five fingers curled about the hilt of a golden greatsword.

At dusk, the interior of the Great Sept of Baelor turned dim and eerie. The last light of day slanted down through the high windows, washing the towering likenesses of the Seven in a red gloom. Around their altars, scented candles flickered whilst deep shadows gathered in the transepts and crept silently across the marble floors. The echoes of the evensongs died away as the last mourners were departing.

Balon Swann and Loras Tyrell remained when the rest had gone. "No man can stand a vigil for seven days and seven nights," Ser Balon said. "When did you last sleep, my lord?"

"When my lord father was alive," said Jaime.

"Allow me to stand tonight in your stead," Ser Loras offered.

"He was not your father." You did not kill him. I did. Tyrion may have loosed the crossbow bolt that slew him, but I loosed Tyrion. "Leave me."

"As my lord commands," said Swann. Ser Loras looked as if he might have argued further, but Ser Balon took his arm and drew him off. Jaime listened to the echoes of their footfalls die away. And then he was alone again with his lord father, amongst the candles and the crystals and the sickly sweet smell of death. His back ached from the weight of his armor, and his legs felt almost numb. He shifted his stance a bit and tightened his fingers around the golden greatsword. He could not wield a sword, but he could hold one. His missing hand was throbbing. That was almost funny. He had more feeling in the hand he'd lost than in the rest of the body that remained to him.

My hand is hungry for a sword. I need to kill someone. Varys, for a start, but first I'd need to find the rock he's hiding under. "I commanded the eunuch to take him to a ship, not to your bedchamber," he told the corpse. "The blood is on his hands as much as... as Tyrion's." The blood is on his

hands as much as mine, he meant to say, but the words stuck in his throat. Whatever Varys did, I made him do.

He had waited in the eunuch's chambers that night, when at last he had decided not to let his little brother die. As he waited, he had sharpened his dagger with one hand, taking a queer comfort from the *scrape-scrape-scrape* of steel on stone. At the sound of footsteps he stood beside the door. Varys entered in a wash of powder and lavender. Jaime stepped out behind him, kicked him in the back of the knee, knelt on his chest, and shoved the knife up under his soft white chin, forcing his head up. "Why, Lord Varys," he'd said pleasantly, "fancy meeting you here."

"Ser Jaime?" Varys panted. "You frightened me."

"I meant to." When he twisted the dagger, a trickle of blood ran down the blade. "I was thinking you might help me pluck my brother from his cell before Ser Ilyn lops his head off. It is an ugly head, I grant you, but he only has the one."

"Yes... well... if you would... remove the blade... yes, gently, as it please my lord, gently, oh, I'm pricked..." The eunuch touched his neck and gaped at the blood on his fingers. "I have always abhorred the sight of my own blood."

"You'll have more to abhor shortly, unless you help me."

Varys struggled to a sitting position. "Your brother... if the Imp should vanish unaccountably from his cell, q-questions would be asked. I would fear for my life..."

"Your life is mine. I do not care what secrets you know. If Tyrion dies, you will not long outlive him, I promise you."

"Ah." The eunuch sucked the blood off his fingers. "You ask a dreadful thing... to loose the Imp who slew our lovely king. Or is it that you believe him innocent?"

"Innocent or guilty," Jaime had said, like the fool he was, "a Lannister pays his debts." The words had come so easy.

He had not slept since. He could see his brother now, the way the dwarf had grinned beneath the stub of his nose as the torchlight licked his face.

“You poor stupid blind crippled fool,” he’d snarled, in a voice thick with malice. “Cersei is a lying whore, she’s been fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and probably Moon Boy for all I know. And I am the monster they all say I am. Yes, I killed your vile son.”

He never said he meant to kill our father. If he had, I would have stopped him. Then I would be the kinslayer, not him.

Jaime wondered where Varys was hiding. Wisely, the master of whisperers had not returned to his own chambers, nor had a search of the Red Keep turned him up. It might be that the eunuch had taken ship with Tyrion, rather than remain to answer awkward questions. If so, the two of them were well out to sea by now, sharing a flagon of Arbor gold in the cabin of a galley.

*Unless my brother murdered Varys too, and left his corpse to rot beneath the castle.* Down there, it might be years before his bones were found. Jaime had led a dozen guards below, with torches and ropes and lanterns. For hours they had groped through twisting passages, narrow crawl spaces, hidden doors, secret steps, and shafts that plunged down into utter blackness. Seldom had he felt so utterly a cripple. A man takes much for granted when he has two hands. Ladders, for an instance. Even crawling did not come easy; not for nought do they speak of *hands* and knees. Nor could he hold a torch and climb, as others could.

And all for naught. They found only darkness, dust, and rats. *And dragons, lurking down below.* He remembered the sullen orange glow of the coals in the iron dragon’s mouth. The brazier warmed a chamber at the bottom of a shaft where half a dozen tunnels met. On the floor he’d found a scuffed mosaic of the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen done in tiles of black and red. *I know you, Kingslayer,* the beast seemed to be saying. *I have been here all the time, waiting for you to come to me.* And it seemed to Jaime that he knew that voice, the iron tones that had once belonged to Rhaegar, Prince of Dragonstone.

The day had been windy when he said farewell to Rhaegar, in the yard of the Red Keep. The prince had donned his night-black armor, with the three-headed dragon picked out in rubies on his breastplate. “Your Grace,”

Jaime had pleaded, “let Darry stay to guard the king this once, or Ser Barristan. Their cloaks are as white as mine.”

Prince Rhaegar shook his head. “My royal sire fears your father more than he does our cousin Robert. He wants you close, so Lord Tywin cannot harm him. I dare not take that crutch away from him at such an hour.”

Jaime’s anger had risen up in his throat. “I am not a crutch. I am a knight of the Kingsguard.”

“Then guard the king,” Ser Jon Darry snapped at him. “When you donned that cloak, you promised to obey.”

Rhaegar had put his hand on Jaime’s shoulder. “When this battle’s done I mean to call a council. Changes will be made. I meant to do it long ago, but... well, it does no good to speak of roads not taken. We shall talk when I return.”

Those were the last words Rhaegar Targaryen ever spoke to him. Outside the gates an army had assembled, whilst another descended on the Trident. So the Prince of Dragonstone mounted up and donned his tall black helm, and rode forth to his doom.

*He was more right than he knew. When the battle was done, there were changes made.* “Aerys thought no harm could come to him if he kept me near,” he told his father’s corpse. “Isn’t that amusing?” Lord Tywin seemed to think so; his smile was wider than before. *He seems to enjoy being dead.*

It was queer, but he felt no grief. *Where are my tears? Where is my rage?* Jaime Lannister had never lacked for rage. “Father,” he told the corpse, “it was you who told me that tears were a mark of weakness in a man, so you cannot expect that I should cry for you.”

A thousand lords and ladies had come that morning to file past the bier, and several thousand smallfolk after noon. They wore somber clothes and solemn faces, but Jaime suspected that many and more were secretly delighted to see the great man brought low. Even in the west, Lord Tywin had been more respected than beloved, and King’s Landing still remembered the Sack.

Of all the mourners, Grand Maester Pycelle had seemed the most distraught. “I have served six kings,” he told Jaime after the second service, whilst sniffing doubtfully about the corpse, “but here before us lies the greatest man I ever knew. Lord Tywin wore no crown, yet he was all a king should be.”

Without his beard, Pycelle looked not only old, but feeble. *Shaving him was the cruelest thing Tyrion could have done*, thought Jaime, who knew what it was to lose a part of yourself, the part that made you who you were. Pycelle’s beard had been magnificent, white as snow and soft as lambswool, a luxuriant growth that covered cheeks and chin and flowed down almost to his belt. The Grand Maester had been wont to stroke it when he pontificated. It had given him an air of wisdom, and concealed all manner of unsavory things: the loose skin dangling beneath the old man’s jaw, the small querulous mouth and missing teeth, warts and wrinkles and age spots too numerous to count. Though Pycelle was trying to regrow what he had lost, he was failing. Only wisps and tufts sprouted from his wrinkled cheeks and weak chin, so thin that Jaime could see the splotchy pink skin beneath.

“Ser Jaime, I have seen terrible things in my time,” the old man said. “Wars, battles, murders most foul... I was a boy in Oldtown when the grey plague took half the city and three-quarters of the Citadel. Lord Hightower burned every ship in port, closed the gates, and commanded his guards to slay all those who tried to flee, be they men, women, or babes in arms. They killed him when the plague had run its course. On the very day he reopened the port, they dragged him from his horse and slit his throat, and his young son’s as well. To this day the ignorant in Oldtown will spit at the sound of his name, but Quenton Hightower did what was needed. Your father was that sort of man as well. A man who did what was needed.”

“Is that why he looks so pleased with himself?”

The vapors rising from the corpse were making Pycelle’s eyes water. “The flesh... as the flesh dries, the muscles grow taut and pull his lips upward. That is no smile, only a... a *drying*, that is all.” He blinked back tears. “You must excuse me. I am so very tired.” Leaning heavily on his

cane, Pycelle tottered slowly from the sept. *That one is dying too*, Jaime realized. Small wonder Cersei called him useless.

To be sure, his sweet sister seemed to think half the court was either useless or treasonous; Pycelle, the Kingsguard, the Tyrells, Jaime himself... even Ser Ilyn Payne, the silent knight who served as headsman. As King's Justice, the dungeons were his responsibility. Since he lacked a tongue, Payne had largely left the running of those dungeons to his underlings, but Cersei held him to blame for Tyrion's escape all the same. *It was my work, not his*, Jaime almost told her. Instead he had promised to find what answers he could from the chief undergaoler, a bentback old man named Rennifer Longwaters.

"I see you wonder, what sort of name is that?" the man had cackled when Jaime went to question him. "It is an old name, 'tis true. I am not one to boast, but there is royal blood in my veins. I am descended from a princess. My father told me the tale when I was a tad of a lad." Longwaters had not been a tad of a lad for many a year, to judge from his spotted head and the white hairs growing from his chin. "She was the fairest treasure of the Maidenvault. Lord Oakenfist the great admiral lost his heart to her, though he was married to another. She gave their son the bastard name of 'Waters' in honor of his father, and he grew to be a great knight, as did his own son, who put the 'Long' before the 'Waters' so men might know that he was not basely born himself. So I have a little dragon in me."

"Yes, I almost mistook you for Aegon the Conqueror," Jaime had answered. "Waters" was a common bastard name about Blackwater Bay; old Longwaters was more like to be descended from some minor household knight than from a princess. "As it matters, though, I have more pressing concerns than your lineage."

Longwaters inclined his head. "The lost prisoner."

"And the missing gaoler."

"Rugen," the old man supplied. "An undergaoler. He had charge of the third level, the black cells."

"Tell me of him," Jaime had to say. *A bloody farce*. He knew who Rugen was, even if Longwaters did not.

“Unkempt, unshaven, coarse of speech. I disliked the man, ’tis true, I do confess it. Rugen was here when I first came, twelve years past. He held his appointment from King Aerys. The man was seldom here, it must be said. I made note of it in my reports, my lord. I most surely did, I give you my word upon it, the word of a man with royal blood.”

Mention that royal blood once more and I may spill some of it, thought Jaime. “Who saw these reports?”

“Certain of them went to the master of coin, others to the master of whisperers. All to the chief gaoler and the King’s Justice. It has always been so in the dungeons.” Longwaters scratched his nose. “Rugen was here when need be, my lord. That must be said. The black cells are little used. Before your lordship’s little brother was sent down, we had Grand Maester Pycelle for a time, and before him Lord Stark the traitor. There were three others, common men, but Lord Stark gave them to the Night’s Watch. I did not think it good to free those three, but the papers were in proper order. I made note of that in a report as well, you may be certain of it.”

“Tell me of the two gaolers who went to sleep.”

“Gaolers?” Longwaters sniffed. “Those were no gaolers. They were merely *turnkeys*. The crown pays wages for twenty turnkeys, my lord, a full score, but during my time we have never had more than twelve. We are supposed to have six undergaolers as well, two on each level, but there are only the three.”

“You and two others?”

Longwaters sniffed again. “I am the *chief* undergaoler, my lord. I am *above* the undergaolers. I am charged with keeping the counts. If my lord would like to look over my books, he will see that all the figures are exact.” Longwaters had consulted the great leather-bound book spread out before him. “At present, we have four prisoners on the first level and one on the second, in addition to your lordship’s brother.” The old man frowned. “Who is fled, to be sure. ’Tis true. I will strike him out.” He took up a quill and began to sharpen it.

Six prisoners, Jaime thought sourly, while we pay wages for twenty turnkeys, six undergaolers, a chief undergaoler, a gaoler, and a King’s

Justice. “I want to question these two turnkeys.”

Rennifer Longwaters let up sharpening his quill and peered doubtfully up at Jaime. “Question them, my lord?”

“You heard me.”

“I did, my lord, I surely did, and yet... my lord may question who he pleases, ’tis true, it is not my place to say that he may not. But, ser, if I may be so bold, I do not think them like to answer. They are dead, my lord.”

“*Dead?* By whose command?”

“Your own, I thought, or... the king’s, mayhaps? I did not ask. It... it is not my place to question the Kingsguard.”

That was salt for his wound; Cersei had used his own men to do her bloody work, them and her precious Kettleblacks.

“You witless fools,” Jaime had snarled at Boros Blount and Osmund Kettleblack later, in a dungeon that stank of blood and death. “What did you imagine you were doing?”

“No more’n we was told, my lord.” Ser Boros was shorter than Jaime, but heavier. “Her Grace commanded it. Your sister.”

Ser Osmund hooked a thumb through his swordbelt. “She said they were to sleep forever. So my brothers and me, we saw to it.”

*That you did.* One corpse sprawled facedown upon the table, like a man passed out at a feast, but it was a puddle of blood beneath his head, not a puddle of wine. The second turnkey had managed to push back from the bench and draw his dagger before someone shoved a longsword through his ribs. His had been the longer, messier end. *I told Varys no one was to be harmed in this escape,* Jaime thought, *but I should have told my brother and my sister.* “This was ill done, ser.”

Ser Osmund shrugged. “They won’t be missed. I’ll wager they was part of it, along with the one who’s gone missing.”

No, Jaime could have told him. Varys dosed their wine to make them sleep. “If so, we might have coaxed the truth from them.” ...she’s been fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and Moon Boy for all I know... “If I had a suspicious nature I might wonder why you were in such haste to



make certain these two were never put to the question. Did you need to silence them to conceal your own part in this?"

"Us?" Kettleblack choked on that. "All we done was what the queen commanded. On my word as your Sworn Brother."

Jaime's phantom fingers twitched as he said, "Get Osney and Osfryd down here and clean up this mess you've made. And the next time my sweet sister commands you to kill a man, come to me first. Elsewise, stay out of my sight, ser."

The words echoed in his head in the dimness of Baelor's Sept. Above him, all the windows had gone black, and he could see the faint light of distant stars. The sun had set for good and all. The stench of death was growing stronger, despite the scented candles. The smell reminded Jaime Lannister of the pass below the Golden Tooth, where he had won a glorious victory in the first days of the war. On the morning after the battle, the crows had feasted on victors and vanquished alike, as once they had feasted on Rhaegar Targaryen after the Trident. *How much can a crown be worth, when a crow can dine upon a king?*

There were crows circling the seven towers and great dome of Baelor's Sept even now, Jaime suspected, their black wings beating against the night air as they searched for a way inside. *Every crow in the Seven Kingdoms should pay homage to you, Father. From Castamere to the Blackwater, you fed them well.* That notion pleased Lord Tywin; his smile widened further. *Bloody hell, he's grinning like a bridegroom at his bedding.*

That was so grotesque it made Jaime laugh aloud.

The sound echoed through the transepts and crypts and chapels, as if the dead interred within the walls were laughing too. Why not? This is more absurd than a mummer's farce, me standing vigil for a father I helped to slay, sending men forth to capture the brother I helped to free... He had commanded Ser Addam Marbrand to search the Street of Silk. "Look under every bed, you know how fond my brother is of brothels." The gold cloaks would find more of interest beneath the whores' skirts than beneath their beds. He wondered how many bastard children would be born of the pointless search.

Unbidden, his thoughts went to Brienne of Tarth. *Stupid stubborn ugly wench.* He wondered where she was. *Father, give her strength.* Almost a prayer... but was it the god he was invoking, the Father Above whose towering gilded likeness glimmered in the candlelight across the sept? Or was he praying to the corpse that lay before him? *Does it matter? They never listened, either one.* The Warrior had been Jaime's god since he was old enough to hold a sword. Other men might be fathers, sons, husbands, but never Jaime Lannister, whose sword was as golden as his hair. He was a warrior, and that was all he would ever be.

I should tell Cersei the truth, admit that it was me who freed our little brother from his cell. The truth had worked so splendidly with Tyrion, after all. I killed your vile son, and now I'm off to kill your father too. Jaime could hear the Imp laughing in the gloom. He turned his head to look, but the sound was only his own laughter coming back at him. He closed his eyes, and just as quickly snapped them open. I must not sleep. If he slept, he might dream. Oh, how Tyrion was sniggering... a lying whore... fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack...

At midnight the hinges on the Father's Doors gave a groan as several hundred septons filed in for their devotions. Some were clad in the cloth-of-silver vestments and crystal coronals that marked the Most Devout; their humbler brethren wore their crystals on thongs about their necks and cinched white robes with seven-stranded belts, each plait a different color. Through the Mother's Doors marched white septas from their cloister, seven abreast and singing softly, while the silent sisters came single file down the Stranger's Steps. Death's handmaidens were garbed in soft grey, their faces hooded and shawled so only their eyes could be seen. A host of brothers appeared as well, in robes of brown and butternut and dun and even undyed roughspun, belted with lengths of hempen rope. Some hung the iron hammer of the Smith about their necks, whilst others carried begging bowls.

None of the devout paid Jaime any mind. They made a circuit of the sept, worshiping at each of the seven altars to honor the seven aspects of the deity. To each god they made sacrifice, to each they sang a hymn. Sweet

and solemn rose their voices. Jaime closed his eyes to listen, but opened them again when he began to sway. *I am more weary than I knew.*

It had been years since his last vigil. *And I was younger then, a boy of fifteen years.* He had worn no armor then, only a plain white tunic. The sept where he'd spent the night was not a third as large as any of the Great Sept's seven transepts. Jaime had laid his sword across the Warrior's knees, piled his armor at his feet, and knelt upon the rough stone floor before the altar. When dawn came his knees were raw and bloody. "All knights must bleed, Jaime," Ser Arthur Dayne had said, when he saw. "Blood is the seal of our devotion." With dawn he tapped him on the shoulder; the pale blade was so sharp that even that light touch cut through Jaime's tunic, so he bled anew. He never felt it. A boy knelt; a knight rose. *The Young Lion, not the Kingslayer.*

But that was long ago, and the boy was dead.

He could not have said when the devotions ended. Perhaps he slept, still standing. When the devout had filed out, the Great Sept grew still once more. The candles were a wall of stars burning in the darkness, though the air was rank with death. Jaime shifted his grip upon the golden greatsword. Perhaps he should have let Ser Loras relieve him after all. *Cersei would have hated that.* The Knight of Flowers was still half a boy, arrogant and vain, but he had it in him to be great, to perform deeds worthy of the White Book.

The White Book would be waiting when this vigil was done, his page open in dumb reproach. *I'll hack the bloody book to pieces before I'll fill it full of lies.* Yet if he would not lie, what could he write but truth?

A woman stood before him.

*It is raining again,* he thought when he saw how wet she was. The water was trickling down her cloak to puddle round her feet. *How did she get here? I never heard her enter.* She was dressed like a tavern wench in a heavy roughspun cloak, badly dyed in mottled browns and fraying at the hem. A hood concealed her face, but he could see the candles dancing in the green pools of her eyes, and when she moved he knew her.

“Cersei.” He spoke slowly, like a man waking from a dream, still wondering where he was. “What hour is it?”

“The hour of the wolf.” His sister lowered her hood, and made a face. “The drowned wolf, perhaps.” She smiled for him, so sweetly. “Do you remember the first time I came to you like this? It was some dismal inn off Weasel Alley, and I put on servant’s garb to get past Father’s guards.”

“I remember. It was Eel Alley.” *She wants something of me.* “Why are you here, at this hour? What would you have of me?” His last word echoed up and down the sept, *mememememememememe*, fading to a whisper. For a moment he dared to hope that all she wanted was the comfort of his arms.

“Speak softly.” Her voice sounded strange... breathless, almost frightened. “Jaime, Kevan has refused me. He will not serve as Hand, he... he knows about us. He said as much.”

“Refused?” That surprised him. “How could he know? He will have read what Stannis wrote, but there is no...”

“*Tyrion* knew,” she reminded him. “Who can say what tales that vile dwarf may have told, or to whom? Uncle Kevan is the least of it. The High Septon... Tyrion raised him to the crown, when the fat one died. He may know as well.” She moved closer. “You *must* be Tommen’s Hand. I do not trust Mace Tyrell. What if he had a hand in Father’s death? He may have been conspiring with Tyrion. The Imp could be on his way to Highgarden...”

“He’s not.”

“Be my Hand,” she pleaded, “and we’ll rule the Seven Kingdoms together, like a king and his queen.”

“You were Robert’s queen. And yet you won’t be mine.”

“I would, if I dared. But our son—”

“Tommen is no son of mine, no more than Joffrey was.” His voice was hard. “You made them Robert’s too.”

His sister flinched. “You swore that you would always love me. It is not loving to make me beg.”

Jaime could smell the fear on her, even through the rank stench of the corpse. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her, to bury his face in her golden curls and promise her that no one would ever hurt her... *not here*, he thought, *not here in front of the gods, and Father*. “No,” he said. “I cannot. Will not.”

“I *need* you. I need my other half.” He could hear the rain pattering against the windows high above. “You are me, I am you. I need you with me. *In* me. Please, Jaime. *Please*.”

Jaime looked to make certain Lord Tywin was not rising from his bier in wrath, but his father lay still and cold, rotting. “I was made for a battlefield, not a council chamber. And now it may be that I am unfit even for that.”

Cersei wiped her tears away on a ragged brown sleeve. “Very well. If it is battlefields you want, battlefields I shall give you.” She jerked her hood up angrily. “I was a fool to come. I was a fool ever to love you.” Her footsteps echoed loudly in the quiet, and left damp splotches on the marble floor.

Dawn caught Jaime almost unawares. As the glass in the dome began to lighten, suddenly there were rainbows shimmering off the walls and floors and pillars, bathing Lord Tywin’s corpse in a haze of many-colored light. The King’s Hand was rotting visibly. His face had taken on a greenish tinge, and his eyes were deeply sunken, two black pits. Fissures had opened in his cheeks, and a foul white fluid was seeping through the joints of his splendid gold-and-crimson armor to pool beneath his body.

The septons were the first to see, when they returned for their dawn devotions. They sang their songs and prayed their prayers and wrinkled up their noses, and one of the Most Devout grew so faint he had to be helped from the sept. Shortly after, a flock of novices came swinging censers, and the air grew so thick with incense that the bier seemed cloaked in smoke. All the rainbows vanished in that perfumed mist, yet the stench persisted, a sweet rotten smell that made Jaime want to gag.

When the doors were opened the Tyrells were amongst the first to enter, as befit their rank. Margaery had brought a great bouquet of golden

roses. She placed them ostentatiously at the foot of Lord Tywin's bier but kept one back and held it beneath her nose as she took her seat. *So the girl is as clever as she is pretty. Tommen could do a deal worse for a queen. Others have.* Margaery's ladies followed her example.

Cersei waited until the rest were in their places to make her entrance, with Tommen at her side. Ser Osmund Kettleblack paced beside them in his white enamel plate and white wool cloak.

"...she's been fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and Moon Boy for all I know..."

Jaime had seen Kettleblack naked in the bathhouse, had seen the black hair on his chest, and the coarser thatch between his legs. He pictured that chest pressed against his sister's, that hair scratching the soft skin of her breasts. *She would not do that. The Imp lied.* Spun gold and black wire tangled, sweaty. Kettleblack's narrow cheeks clenching each time he thrust. Jaime could hear his sister moan. *No. A lie.*

Red-eyed and pale, Cersei climbed the steps to kneel above their father, drawing Tommen down beside her. The boy recoiled at the sight, but his mother seized his wrist before he could pull away. "*Pray,*" she whispered, and Tommen tried. But he was only eight and Lord Tywin was a horror. One desperate breath of air, then the king began to sob. "*Stop that!*" Cersei said. Tommen turned his head and doubled over, retching. His crown fell off and rolled across the marble floor. His mother pulled back in disgust, and all at once the king was running for the doors, as fast as his eight-year-old legs could carry him.

"Ser Osmund, relieve me," Jaime said sharply, as Kettleblack turned to chase the crown. He handed the man the golden sword and went after his king. In the Hall of Lamps he caught him, beneath the eyes of two dozen startled septas. "I'm sorry," Tommen wept. "I will do better on the morrow. Mother says a king must show the way, but the smell made me sick."

*This will not do. Too many eager ears and watching eyes.* "Best we go outside, Your Grace." Jaime led the boy out to where the air was as fresh and clean as King's Landing ever got. Twoscore gold cloaks had been posted around the plaza to guard the horses and the litters. He took the king

off to the side, well away from everyone, and sat him down upon the marble steps. "I wasn't scared," the boy insisted. "The smell made me sick. Didn't it make you sick? How could you bear it, Uncle, ser?"

I have smelled my own hand rotting, when Vargo Hoat made me wear it for a pendant. "A man can bear most anything, if he must," Jaime told his son. I have smelled a man roasting, as King Aerys cooked him in his own armor. "The world is full of horrors, Tommen. You can fight them, or laugh at them, or look without seeing... go away inside."

Tommen considered that. "I... I used to go away inside sometimes," he confessed, "when Joffy..."

"*Joffrey*." Cersei stood over them, the wind whipping her skirts around her legs. "Your brother's name was *Joffrey*. He would never have shamed me so."

"I never meant to. I wasn't frightened, Mother. It was only that your lord father smelled so bad..."

"Do you think he smelled any sweeter to me? I have a nose too." She caught his ear and pulled him to his feet. "Lord Tyrell has a nose. Did you see him retching in the holy sept? Did you see Lady Margaery bawling like a baby?"

Jaime got to his feet. "Cersei, enough."

Her nostrils flared. "Ser? Why are you here? You swore to stand vigil over Father until the wake was done, as I recall."

"It *is* done. Go look at him."

"No. Seven days and seven nights, you said. Surely the Lord Commander remembers how to count to seven. Take the number of your fingers, then add two."

Others had begun to stream out onto the plaza, fleeing the noxious odors in the sept. "Cersei, keep your voice down," Jaime warned. "Lord Tyrell is approaching."

That reached her. The queen drew Tommen to her side. Mace Tyrell bowed before them. "His Grace is not unwell, I hope?"

"The king was overwhelmed by grief," said Cersei.

“As are we all. If there is aught that I can do...”

High above, a crow screamed loudly. He was perched on the statue of King Baelor, sitting on his holy head. “There is much and more you can do for Tommen, my lord,” Jaime said. “Perhaps you would do Her Grace the honor of supping with her, after the evening services?”

Cersei threw him a withering look, but for once she had the sense to bite her tongue.

“Sup?” Tyrell seemed taken aback. “I suppose... of course, we should be honored. My lady wife and I.”

The queen forced a smile and made pleasant noises. But when Tyrell had taken his leave and Tommen had been sent off with Ser Addam Marbrand, she turned on Jaime angrily. “Are you drunk or dreaming, ser? Pray tell, why am I having supper with that grasping fool and his puerile wife?” A gust of wind stirred her golden hair. “I will *not* name him Hand, if that’s what—”

“You need Tyrell,” Jaime broke in, “but not *here*. Ask him to capture Storm’s End for Tommen. Flatter him, and tell him you need him in the field, to replace Father. Mace fancies himself a mighty warrior. Either he will deliver Storm’s End to you, or he will muck it up and look a fool. Either way, you win.”

“Storm’s End?” Cersei looked thoughtful. “Yes, but... Lord Tyrell has made it tediously plain that he will not leave King’s Landing till Tommen marries Margaery.”

Jaime sighed. “Then let them wed. It will be years before Tommen is old enough to consummate the marriage. And until he does, the union can always be set aside. Give Tyrell his wedding and send him off to play at war.”

A wary smile crept across his sister’s face. “Even sieges have their dangers,” she murmured. “Why, our Lord of Highgarden might even lose his life in such a venture.”

“There is that risk,” conceded Jaime. “Especially if his patience runs thin this time, and he elects to storm the gate.”



Cersei gave him a lingering look. “You know,” she said, “for a moment you sounded quite like Father.”