

JAIME

Lord Tywin Lannister had entered the city on a stallion, his enameled crimson armor polished and gleaming, bright with gems and goldwork. He left it in a tall wagon draped with crimson banners, with six silent sisters riding attendance on his bones.

The funeral procession departed King's Landing through the Gate of the Gods, wider and more splendid than the Lion Gate. The choice felt wrong to Jaime. His father had been a lion, that no one could deny, but even Lord Tywin never claimed to be a god.

An honor guard of fifty knights surrounded Lord Tywin's wagon, crimson pennons fluttering from their lances. The lords of the west followed close behind them. The winds snapped at their banners, making their charges dance and flutter. As he trotted up the column, Jaime passed boars, badgers, and beetles, a green arrow and a red ox, crossed halberds, crossed spears, a treecat, a strawberry, a maunch, four sunbursts counterchanged.

Lord Brax was wearing a pale grey doublet slashed with cloth-of-silver, an amethyst unicorn pinned above his heart. Lord Jast was armored in black steel, three gold lion's heads inlaid on his breastplate. The rumors of his death had not been far wrong, to look at him; wounds and imprisonment had left him a shadow of the man he'd been. Lord Banefort had weathered battle better, and looked ready to return to war at once. Plumm wore purple, Prester ermine, Moreland russet and green, but each had donned a cloak of crimson silk, in honor of the man they were escorting home.

Behind the lords came a hundred crossbowmen and three hundred men-at-arms, and crimson flowed from their shoulders as well. In his white cloak and white scale armor, Jaime felt out of place amongst that river of red.

Nor did his uncle make him more at ease. "Lord Commander," Ser Kevan said, when Jaime trotted up beside him at the head of the column. "Does Her Grace have some last command for me?"

“I am not here for Cersei.” A drum began to beat behind them, slow, measured, funereal. *Dead*, it seemed to say, *dead, dead*. “I came to make my farewells. He was my father.”

“And hers.”

“I am not Cersei. I have a beard, and she has breasts. If you are still confused, nuncle, count our hands. Cersei has two.”

“Both of you have a taste for mockery,” his uncle said. “Spare me your japes, ser, I have no taste for them.”

“As you will.” *This is not going as well as I might have hoped*. “Cersei would have wanted to see you off, but she has many pressing duties.”

Ser Kevan snorted. “So do we all. How fares your king?” His tone made the question a reproach.

“Well enough,” Jaime said defensively. “Balon Swann is with him during the mornings. A good and valiant knight.”

“Once that went without saying when men spoke of those who wore the white cloak.”

No man can choose his brothers, Jaime thought. Give me leave to pick my own men, and the Kingsguard will be great again. Put that baldly, though, it sounded feeble; an empty boast from a man the realm called Kingslayer. A man with shit for honor. Jaime let it go. He had not come to argue with his uncle. “Ser,” he said, “you need to make your peace with Cersei.”

“Are we at war? No one told me.”

Jaime ignored that. “Strife between Lannister and Lannister can only help the enemies of our House.”

“If there is strife, it will not be my doing. Cersei wants to rule. Well and good. The realm is hers. All I ask is to be left in peace. My place is at Darry with my son. The castle must needs be restored, the lands planted and protected.” He gave a bark of bitter laughter. “And your sister has left me little else to occupy my time. I had as well see Lancel wed. His bride has grown impatient waiting for us to make our way to Darry.”

His widow from the Twins. His cousin Lancel was riding ten yards behind them. With his hollow eyes and dry white hair, he looked older than Lord Jast. Jaime could feel his phantom fingers itching at the sight of him. *...fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and Moon Boy for all I know...* He had tried to speak with Lancel more times than he could count, but never found him alone. If his father was not with him, some septon was. *He may be Kevan's son, but he has milk in his veins. Tyrion was lying to me. His words were meant to wound.*

Jaime put his cousin from his thoughts and turned back to his uncle. "Will you remain at Darry after the wedding?"

"For a while, mayhaps. Sandor Clegane is raiding along the Trident, it would seem. Your sister wants his head. It may be that he has joined Dondarrion."

Jaime had heard about Saltpans. By now half the realm had heard. The raid had been exceptionally savage. Women raped and mutilated, children butchered in their mothers' arms, half the town put to the torch. "Randyll Tarly is at Maidenpool. Let him deal with the outlaws. I would sooner have you go to Riverrun."

"Ser Daven has command there. The Warden of the West. He has no need of me. Lancel does."

"As you say, uncle." Jaime's head was pounding to the same beat as the drum. *Dead, dead, dead.* "You would do well to keep your knights around you."

His uncle gave him a cool stare. "Is that a threat, ser?"

A threat? The suggestion took him aback. "A caution. I only meant... Sandor is dangerous."

"I was hanging outlaws and robber knights when you were still shitting in your swaddling clothes. I am not like to go off and face Clegane and Dondarrion by myself, if that is what you fear, ser. Not every Lannister is a fool for glory."

Why, nuncle, I believe you are talking about me. "Addam Marbrand could deal with these outlaws just as well as you. So could Brax, Banefort,

Plumm, any of these others. But none would make a good King's Hand."

"Your sister knows my terms. They have not changed. Tell her that, the next time you are in her bedchamber." Ser Kevan put his heels into his courser and galloped ahead, putting an abrupt end to their conversation.

Jaime let him go, his missing sword hand twitching. He had hoped against hope that Cersei had somehow misunderstood, but plainly that was wrong. *He knows about the two of us. About Tommen and Myrcella. And Cersei knows he knows.* Ser Kevan was a Lannister of Casterly Rock. He could not believe that she would ever do him harm, but... *I was wrong about Tyrion, why not about Cersei?* When sons were killing fathers, what was there to stop a niece from ordering an uncle slain? *An inconvenient uncle, who knows too much.* Though perhaps Cersei was hoping that the Hound might do her work for her. If Sandor Clegane cut down Ser Kevan, she would not need to bloody her own hands. *And he will, if they should meet.* Kevan Lannister had once been a stout man with a sword, but he was no longer young, and the Hound...

The column had caught up to him. As his cousin rode past, flanked by his two septons, Jaime called out to him. "Lancel. Coz. I wanted to congratulate you upon your marriage. I only regret that my duties do not permit me to attend."

"His Grace must be protected."

"And will be. Still, I hate to miss your bedding. It is your first marriage and her second, I understand. I'm sure my lady will be pleased to show you what goes where."

The bawdy remark drew a laugh from several nearby lords and a disapproving look from Lancel's septons. His cousin squirmed uncomfortably in the saddle. "I know enough to do my duty as a husband, ser."

"That's just the thing a bride wants on her wedding night," said Jaime. "A husband who knows how to do his *duty*."

A flush crept up Lancel's cheeks. "I pray for you, cousin. And for Her Grace the queen. May the Crone lead her to her wisdom and the Warrior

defend her.”

“Why would Cersei need the Warrior? She has me.” Jaime turned his horse about, his white cloak snapping in the wind. The Imp was lying. Cersei would sooner have Robert’s corpse between her legs than a pious fool like Lancel. Tyrion, you evil bastard, you should have lied about someone more likely. He galloped past his lord father’s funeral wayn toward the city in the distance.

The streets of King’s Landing seemed almost deserted as Jaime Lannister made his way back to the Red Keep atop Aegon’s High Hill. The soldiers who had crowded the city’s gambling dens and pot shops were largely gone now. Garlan the Gallant had taken half the Tyrell strength back to Highgarden, and his lady mother and grandmother had gone with him. The other half had marched south with Mace Tyrell and Mathis Rowan to invest Storm’s End.

As for the Lannister host, two thousand seasoned veterans remained encamped outside the city walls, awaiting the arrival of Paxter Redwyne’s fleet to carry them across Blackwater Bay to Dragonstone. Lord Stannis appeared to have left only a small garrison behind him when he sailed north, so two thousand men would be more than sufficient, Cersei had judged.

The rest of the westermen had gone back to their wives and children, to rebuild their homes, plant their fields, and bring in one last harvest. Cersei had taken Tommen round their camps before they marched, to let them cheer their little king. She had never looked more beautiful than she did that day, with a smile on her lips and the autumn sunlight shining on her golden hair. Whatever else one might say about his sister, she did know how to make men love her when she cared enough to try.

As Jaime trotted through the castle gates, he came upon two dozen knights riding at a quintain in the outer yard. *Something else I can no longer do*, he thought. A lance was heavier and more cumbersome than a sword, and swords were proving trial enough. He supposed he might try holding the lance with his left hand, but that would mean shifting his shield to his right arm. In a tilt, a man’s foe was always to the left. A shield on his right

arm would prove about as useful as nipples on his breastplate. *No, my jousting days are done*, he thought as he dismounted... but all the same, he stopped to watch a while.

Ser Tallad the Tall lost his mount when the sandbag came around and thumped him in the head. Strongboar struck the shield so hard he cracked it. Kennos of Kayce finished the destruction. A new shield was hung for Ser Dermot of the Rainwood. Lambert Turnberry only struck a glancing blow, but Beardless Jon Bettley, Humfrey Swyft, and Alyn Stackspear all scored solid hits, and Red Ronnet Connington broke his lance clean. Then the Knight of Flowers mounted up and put the others all to shame.

Jousting was three-quarters horsemanship, Jaime had always believed. Ser Loras rode superbly, and handled a lance as if he'd been born holding one... which no doubt accounted for his mother's pinched expression. *He puts the point just where he means to put it, and seems to have the balance of a cat. Perhaps it was not such a fluke that he unhorsed me.* It was a shame that he would never have the chance to try the boy again. He left the whole men to their sport.

Cersei was in her solar in Maegor's Holdfast, with Tommen and Lord Merryweather's dark-haired Myrish wife. The three of them were laughing at Grand Maester Pycelle. "Did I miss some clever jape?" Jaime said, as he shoved through the door.

"Oh, look," purred Lady Merryweather, "your brave brother has returned, Your Grace."

"Most of him." The queen was in her cups, Jaime realized. Of late, Cersei always seemed to have a flagon of wine to hand, she who had once scorned Robert Baratheon for his drinking. He disliked that, but these days he seemed to dislike everything his sister did. "Grand Maester," she said, "share the tidings with the Lord Commander, if you would."

Pycelle looked desperately uncomfortable. "There has been a bird," he said. "From Stokeworth. Lady Tanda sends word that her daughter Lollys has been delivered of a strong, healthy son."

"And you will never guess what they have named the little bastard, brother."

“They wanted to name him Tywin, I recall.”

“Yes, but I forbade it. I told Falyse that I would not have our father’s noble name bestowed upon the ill-gotten spawn of some pig boy and a feeble-witted sow.”

“Lady Stokeworth insists the child’s name was not her doing,” Grand Maester Pycelle put in. Perspiration dotted his wrinkled forehead. “Lollys’s husband made the choice, she writes. This man Bronn, he... it would seem that he...”

“Tyrion,” ventured Jaime. “He named the child *Tyrion*.”

The old man gave a tremulous nod, mopping at his brow with the sleeve of his robe.

Jaime had to laugh. “There you are, sweet sister. You have been looking everywhere for Tyrion, and all the time he’s been hiding in Lollys’s womb.”

“Droll. You and Bronn are both so droll. No doubt the bastard is sucking on one of Lollys Lackwit’s dugs even as we speak, whilst this sellsword looks on, smirking at his little insolence.”

“Perhaps this child bears some resemblance to your brother,” suggested Lady Merryweather. “He might have been born deformed, or without a nose.” She laughed a throaty laugh.

“We shall have to send the darling boy a gift,” the queen declared. “Won’t we, Tommen?”

“We could send him a kitten.”

“A lion cub,” said Lady Merryweather. *To rip his little throat out*, her smile suggested.

“I had a different sort of gift in mind,” said Cersei.

A new stepfather, most like. Jaime knew the look in his sister’s eyes. He had seen it before, most recently on the night of Tommen’s wedding, when she burned the Tower of the Hand. The green light of the wildfire had bathed the face of the watchers, so they looked like nothing so much as rotting corpses, a pack of gleeful ghouls, but some of the corpses were prettier than others. Even in the baleful glow, Cersei had been beautiful to

look upon. She'd stood with one hand on her breast, her lips parted, her green eyes shining. *She is crying*, Jaime had realized, but whether it was from grief or ecstasy he could not have said.

The sight had filled him with disquiet, reminding him of Aerys Targaryen and the way a burning would arouse him. A king has no secrets from his Kingsguard. Relations between Aerys and his queen had been strained during the last years of his reign. They slept apart and did their best to avoid each other during the waking hours. But whenever Aerys gave a man to the flames, Queen Rhaella would have a visitor in the night. The day he burned his mace-and-dagger Hand, Jaime and Jon Darry had stood at guard outside her bedchamber whilst the king took his pleasure. "You're hurting me," they had heard Rhaella cry through the oaken door. "You're *hurting* me." In some queer way, that had been worse than Lord Chelsted's screaming. "We are sworn to protect her as well," Jaime had finally been driven to say. "We are," Darry allowed, "but not from him."

Jaime had only seen Rhaella once after that, the morning of the day she left for Dragonstone. The queen had been cloaked and hooded as she climbed inside the royal wheelhouse that would take her down Aegon's High Hill to the waiting ship, but he heard her maids whispering after she was gone. They said the queen looked as if some beast had savaged her, clawing at her thighs and chewing on her breasts. *A crowned beast*, Jaime knew.

By the end the Mad King had become so fearful that he would allow no blade in his presence, save for the swords his Kingsguard wore. His beard was matted and unwashed, his hair a silver-gold tangle that reached his waist, his fingernails cracked yellow claws nine inches long. Yet still the blades tormented him, the ones he could never escape, the blades of the Iron Throne. His arms and legs were always covered with scabs and half-healed cuts.

Let him be king over charred bones and cooked meat, Jaime remembered, studying his sister's smile. *Let him be the king of ashes*. "Your Grace," he said, "might we have a private word?"

“As you wish. Tommen, it is past time you had your lesson for the day. Go with the Grand Maester.”

“Yes, Mother. We are learning about Baelor the Blessed.”

Lady Merryweather took her leave as well, kissing the queen on both cheeks. “Shall I return for supper, Your Grace?”

“I shall be very cross with you if you do not.”

Jaime could not help but note the way the Myrish woman moved her hips as she walked. *Every step is a seduction.* When the door closed behind her, he cleared his throat and said, “First these Kettleblacks, then Qyburn, now her. It’s a queer menagerie you are keeping these days, sweet sister.”

“I am growing very fond of Lady Taena. She amuses me.”

“She is one of Margaery Tyrell’s companions,” Jaime reminded her. “She’s informing on you to the little queen.”

“Of course she is.” Cersei went to the sideboard to fill her cup anew. “Margaery was thrilled when I asked her leave to take Taena on as my companion. You should have heard her. *‘She will be a sister to you, as she’s been to me. Of course you must have her! I have my cousins and my other ladies.’* Our little queen does not want me to be lonely.”

“If you know she is a spy, why take her on?”

“Margaery is not half so clever as she thinks. She has no notion what a sweet serpent she has in that Myrish slut. I use Taena to feed the little queen what I want her to know. Some of it is even true.” Cersei’s eyes were bright with mischief. “And Taena tells me everything Maid Margaery is doing.”

“Does she? How much do you know about this woman?”

“I know she is a mother, with a young son that she wants to rise high in this world. She will do whatever is required to see that he does. Mothers are all the same. Lady Merryweather may be a serpent, but she is far from stupid. She knows I can do more for her than Margaery, so she makes herself useful to me. You would be surprised at all the interesting things she’s told me.”

“What sorts of things?”

Cersei sat beneath the window. “Did you know that the Queen of Thorns keeps a chest of coins in her wheelhouse? Old gold from before the Conquest. Should any tradesman be so unwise as to name a price in golden coins, she pays him with hands from Highgarden, each half the weight of one of our dragons. What merchant would dare complain of being cheated by Mace Tyrell’s lady mother?” She sipped her wine, and said, “Did you enjoy your little ride?”

“Our uncle remarked upon your absence.”

“Our uncle’s remarks do not concern me.”

“They should. You could make good use of him. If not at Riverrun or the Rock, then in the north against Lord Stannis. Father always relied upon Kevan when—”

“Roose Bolton is our Warden of the North. He will deal with Stannis.”

“Lord Bolton is trapped below the Neck, cut off from the north by the ironmen at Moat Cailin.”

“Not for long. Bolton’s bastard son will soon remove that little obstacle. Lord Bolton will have two thousand Freys to augment his own strength, under Lord Walder’s sons Hosteen and Aenys. That should be more than enough to deal with Stannis and a few thousand broken men.”

“Ser Kevan—”

“—will have his hands full at Darry, teaching Lancel how to wipe his arse. Father’s death has unmanned him. He is an old done man. Daven and Damion will serve us better.”

“They’ll suffice.” Jaime had no quarrel with his cousins. “You still require a Hand, however. If not our uncle, who?”

His sister laughed. “Not you. Have no fear on that count. Perhaps Taena’s husband. His grandfather was Hand under Aerys.”

The horn-of-plenty Hand. Jaime remembered Owen Merryweather well enough; an amiable man, but ineffectual. “As I recall, he did so well that Aerys exiled him and seized his lands.”

“Robert gave them back. Some, at least. Taena would be pleased if Orton could recover the rest.”

“Is this about pleasing some Myrish whore? Here I thought it was about governing the realm.”

“*I* govern the realm.”

Seven save us all, you do. His sister liked to think of herself as Lord Tywin with teats, but she was wrong. Their father had been as relentless and implacable as a glacier, where Cersei was all wildfire, especially when thwarted. She had been giddy as a maiden when she learned that Stannis had abandoned Dragonstone, certain that he had finally given up the fight and sailed away to exile. When word came down from the north that he had turned up again at the Wall, her fury had been fearful to behold. *She does not lack for wits, but she has no judgment, and no patience.* “You need a strong Hand to help you.”

“A *weak* ruler needs a strong Hand, as Aerys needed Father. A strong ruler requires only a diligent servant to carry out his orders.” She swirled her wine. “Lord Hallyne might suit. He would not be the first pyromancer to serve as the King’s Hand.”

No. I killed the last one. “There is talk that you mean to make Aurane Waters the master of ships.”

“Has someone been informing on me?” When he did not answer, Cersei tossed her hair back, and said, “Waters is well suited to the office. He has spent half his life on ships.”

“Half his life? He cannot be more than twenty.”

“Two-and-twenty, and what of it? Father was not even one-and-twenty when Aerys Targaryen named him Hand. It is past time Tommen had some young men about him in place of all these wrinkled greybeards. Aurane is strong and vigorous.”

Strong and vigorous and handsome, Jaime thought. *...she’s been fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and Moon Boy for all I know...* “Paxter Redwyne would be a better choice. He commands the largest fleet in Westeros. Aurane Waters could command a skiff, but only if you bought him one.”

“You are a child, Jaime. Redwyne is Tyrell’s bannerman, and nephew to that hideous grandmother of his. I want none of Lord Tyrell’s creatures on my council.”

“Tommen’s council, you mean.”

“You know what I mean.”

Too well. “I know that Aurane Waters is a bad idea, and Hallyne is a worse one. As for Qyburn... gods be good, Cersei, he rode with *Vargo Hoat*. The Citadel *stripped him of his chain!*”

“The grey sheep. Qyburn has made himself most useful to me. And he is loyal, which is more than I can say of mine own kin.”

The crows will feast upon us all if you go on this way, sweet sister. “Cersei, listen to yourself. You are seeing dwarfs in every shadow and making foes of friends. Uncle Kevan is not your enemy. *I am not your enemy.*”

Her face twisted in fury. “I begged you for your help. I went down on my knees to you, and *you refused me!*”

“My vows...”

“...did not stop you slaying Aerys. Words are wind. You could have had me, but you chose a cloak instead. Get out.”

“Sister...”

“*Get out*, I said. I am sick of looking at that ugly stump of yours. *Get out!*” To speed him on his way, she heaved her wine cup at his head. She missed, but Jaime took the hint.

Evenfall found him sitting alone in the common room of White Sword Tower, with a cup of Dornish red and the White Book. He was turning pages with the stump of his sword hand when the Knight of Flowers entered, removed his cloak and swordbelt and hung them on a wall peg next to Jaime’s.

“I saw you in the yard today,” said Jaime. “You rode well.”

“Better than *well*, surely.” Ser Loras poured himself a cup of wine, and took a seat across the half-moon table.

“A more modest man might have answered ‘My lord is too kind,’ or ‘I had a good mount.’”

“The horse was adequate, and my lord is as kind as I am modest.” Loras waved at the book. “Lord Renly always said that books were for maesters.”

“This one is for us. The history of every man who has ever worn a white cloak is written here.”

“I have glanced at it. The shields are pretty. I prefer books with more illuminations. Lord Renly owned a few with drawings that would turn a septon blind.”

Jaime had to smile. “There’s none of that here, ser, but the histories will open your eyes. You would do well to know about the lives of those who went before.”

“I do. Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, Ser Ryam Redwyne, the Greatheart, Barristan the Bold...”

“...Gwayne Corbray, Alyn Connington, the Demon of Darry, aye. You will have heard of Lucamore Strong as well.”

“Ser Lucamore the Lusty?” Ser Loras seemed amused. “Three wives and thirty children, was it? They cut his cock off. Shall I sing the song for you, my lord?”

“And Ser Terrence Toyne?”

“Bedded the king’s mistress and died screaming. The lesson is, men who wear white breeches need to keep them tightly laced.”

“Gyles Greycloak? Orivel the Open-Handed?”

“Gyles was a traitor, Orivel a coward. Men who shamed the white cloak. What is my lord suggesting?”

“Little and less. Don’t take offense where none was meant, ser. How about Long Tom Costayne?”

Ser Loras shook his head.

“He was a Kingsguard knight for sixty years.”

“When was that? I’ve never—”

“Ser Donnel of Duskendale, then?”

“I may have heard the name, but—”

“Addison Hill? The White Owl, Michael Mertyns? Jeffory Norcross? They called him Neveryield. Red Robert Flowers? What can you tell me of them?”

“Flowers is a bastard name. So is Hill.”

“Yet both men rose to command the Kingsguard. Their tales are in the book. Rolland Darklyn is in here too. The youngest man ever to serve in the Kingsguard, until me. He was given his cloak on a battlefield and died within an hour of donning it.”

“He can’t have been very good.”

“Good enough. He died, but his king lived. A lot of brave men have worn the white cloak. Most have been forgotten.”

“Most deserve to be forgotten. The heroes will always be remembered. The best.”

“The best and the worst.” *So one of us is like to live in song.* “And a few who were a bit of both. Like him.” He tapped the page he had been reading.

“Who?” Ser Loras craned his head around to see. “Ten black pellets on a scarlet field. I do not know those arms.”

“They belonged to Criston Cole, who served the first Viserys and the second Aegon.” Jaime closed the White Book. “They called him Kingmaker.”