

JAIME

“I had hoped that by now you would have grown tired of that wretched beard. All that hair makes you look like Robert.” His sister had put aside her mourning for a jade-green gown with sleeves of silver Myrish lace. An emerald the size of a pigeon’s egg hung on a golden chain about her neck.

“Robert’s beard was black. Mine is gold.”

“Gold? Or silver?” Cersei plucked a hair from beneath his chin and held it up. It was grey. “All the color is draining out of you, brother. You’ve become a ghost of what you were, a pale crippled thing. And so bloodless, always in white.” She flicked the hair away. “I prefer you garbed in crimson and gold.”

I prefer you dappled in sunlight, with water beading on your naked skin. He wanted to kiss her, carry her to her bedchamber, throw her on the bed... she’s been fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and Moon Boy... “I will make a bargain with you. Relieve me of this duty, and my razor is yours to command.”

Her mouth tightened. She had been drinking hot spiced wine and smelled of nutmeg. “You presume to dicker with me? Need I remind you, you are sworn to obey.”

“I am sworn to protect the king. My place is at his side.”

“Your place is wherever he sends you.”

“Tommen puts his seal on every paper that you put in front of him. This is your doing, and it’s folly. Why name Daven your Warden of the West if you have no faith in him?”

Cersei took a seat beneath the window. Behind her Jaime could see the blackened ruin of the Tower of the Hand. “Why so reluctant, ser? Did you lose your courage with your hand?”

“I swore an oath to Lady Stark, never again to take up arms against the Starks or Tullys.”

“A drunken promise made with a sword at your throat.”

“How can I defend Tommen if I am not with him?”

“By defeating his enemies. Father always said that a swift sword stroke is a better defense than any shield. Admittedly, most sword strokes require a hand. Still, even a crippled lion may inspire fear. I want Riverrun. I want Brynden Tully chained or dead. And someone needs to set Harrenhal to rights. We have urgent need of Wylis Manderly, assuming he is still alive and captive, but the garrison has not replied to any of our ravens.”

“Those are Gregor’s men at Harrenhal,” Jaime reminded her. “The Mountain liked them cruel and stupid. Most like they ate your ravens, messages and all.”

“That’s why I’m sending you. They may eat you as well, brave brother, but I trust you’ll give them indigestion.” Cersei smoothed her skirt. “I want Ser Osmund to command the Kingsguard in your absence.”

...she’s been fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and Moon Boy for all I know... “That’s not your choice. If I must go, Ser Loras will command here in my stead.”

“Is that a jape? You know how I feel about Ser Loras.”

“If you had not sent Balon Swann to Dorne—”

“I need him there. These Dornishmen cannot be trusted. That red snake championed Tyrion, have you forgotten that? I will not leave my daughter to their mercy. And I will *not* have Loras Tyrell commanding the Kingsguard.”

“Ser Loras is thrice the man Ser Osmund is.”

“Your notions of manhood have changed somewhat, brother.”

Jaime felt his anger rising. “True, Loras does not leer at your teats the way Ser Osmund does, but I hardly think—”

“Think about this.” Cersei slapped his face.

Jaime made no attempt to block the blow. “I see I need a thicker beard, to cushion me against my queen’s caresses.” He wanted to rip her gown off

and turn her blows to kisses. He'd done it before, back when he had two good hands.

The queen's eyes were green ice. "You had best go, ser."

...Lancel, Osmund Kettleblack, and Moon Boy...

"Are you deaf as well as maimed? You'll find the door behind you, ser."

"As you command." Jaime turned on his heel and left her.

Somewhere the gods were laughing. Cersei had never taken kindly to being balked, he *knew* that. Softer words might have swayed her, yet of late the very sight of her made him angry.

Part of him would be glad to put King's Landing behind him. He had no taste for the company of the lickspittles and fools who surrounded Cersei. "The smallest council," they were calling them in Flea Bottom, according to Addam Marbrand. And Qyburn... he might have saved Jaime's life, but he was still a Bloody Mummer. "Qyburn stinks of secrets," he warned Cersei. That only made her laugh. "We all have secrets, brother," she replied.

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

Forty knights and as many esquires awaited him outside the Red Keep's stables. Half were westerners sworn to House Lannister, the others recent foes turned doubtful friends. Ser Dermot of the Rainwood would carry Tommen's standard, Red Ronnet Connington the white banner of the Kingsguard. A Paege, a Piper, and a Peckledon would share the honor of squiring for the Lord Commander. "Keep friends at your back and foes where you can see them," Sumner Crakehall had once counseled him. Or had that been Father?

His palfrey was a blood bay, his destrier a magnificent grey stallion. It had been long years since Jaime had named any of his horses; he had seen too many die in battle, and that was harder when you named them. But when the Piper boy started calling them Honor and Glory, he laughed and let the names stand. Glory wore trappings of Lannister crimson; Honor was

barded in Kingsguard white. Josmyn Peckledon held the palfrey's reins as Ser Jaime mounted. The squire was skinny as a spear, with long arms and legs, greasy mouse-brown hair, and cheeks soft with peach fuzz. His cloak was Lannister crimson, but his surcoat showed the ten purple mullets of his own House arrayed upon a yellow field. "My lord," the lad asked, "will you be wanting your new hand?"

"Wear it, Jaime," urged Ser Kennos of Kayce. "Wave at the smallfolk and give them a tale to tell their children."

"I think not." Jaime would not show the crowds a golden lie. *Let them see the stump. Let them see the cripple.* "But feel free to make up for my lack, Ser Kennos. Wave with both hands, and waggle your feet if it please you." He gathered the reins in his left hand and wheeled his horse around. "Payne," he called as the rest were forming up, "you'll ride beside me."

Ser Ilyn Payne made his way to Jaime's side, looking like the beggar at the ball. His ringmail was old and rusted, worn over a stained jack of boiled leather. Neither the man nor his mount showed any heraldry; his shield was so hacked and battered it was hard to say what color paint might once have covered it. With his grim face and deep-sunk hollow eyes, Ser Ilyn might have passed for death himself... as he had, for years.

No longer, though. Ser Ilyn had been half of Jaime's price, for swallowing his boy king's command like a good little Lord Commander. The other half had been Ser Addam Marbrand. "I need them," he had told his sister, and Cersei had not put up a fight. *Most like she's pleased to rid herself of them.* Ser Addam was a boyhood friend of Jaime's, and the silent headsman had belonged to their father, if he belonged to anyone. Payne had been the captain of the Hand's guard when he had been heard boasting that it was Lord Tywin who ruled the Seven Kingdoms and told King Aerys what to do. Aerys Targaryen took his tongue for that.

"Open the gates," said Jaime, and Strongboar, in his booming voice, called out, "*OPEN THE GATES!*"

When Mace Tyrell had marched out through the Mud Gate to the sound of drums and fiddles, thousands lined the streets to cheer him off. Little boys had joined the march, striding along beside the Tyrell soldiers with

heads held high and legs pumping, whilst their sisters threw down kisses from the windows.

Not so today. A few whores called out invitations as they passed, and a meat pie man cried his wares. In Cobbler's Square two threadbare sparrows were haranguing several hundred smallfolk, crying doom upon the heads of godless men and demon worshipers. The crowd parted for the column. Sparrows and cobblers alike looked on with dull eyes. "They like the smell of roses but have no love for lions," Jaime observed. "My sister would be wise to take note of that." Ser Ilyn made no reply. *The perfect companion for a long ride. I will enjoy his conversation.*

The greater part of his command awaited him beyond the city walls; Ser Addam Marbrand with his outriders, Ser Steffon Swyft and the baggage train, the Holy Hundred of old Ser Bonifer the Good, Sarsfield's mounted archers, Maester Gulian with four cages full of ravens, two hundred heavy horse under Ser Flement Brax. Not a great host, all in all; fewer than a thousand men in total. Numbers were the last thing needed at Riverrun. A Lannister army already invested the castle, and an even larger force of Freys; the last bird they'd received suggested that the besiegers were having difficulty keeping themselves fed. Brynden Tully had scoured the land clean before retiring behind his walls.

Not that it required much scouring. From what Jaime had seen of the riverlands, scarce a field remained unburnt, a town unsacked, a maiden undespoiled. And now my sweet sister sends me to finish the work that Amory Lorch and Gregor Clegane began. It left a bitter taste in his mouth.

This near to King's Landing, the kingsroad was as safe as any road could be in such times, yet Jaime sent Marbrand and his outriders ahead to scout. "Robb Stark took me unawares in the Whispering Wood," he said. "That will never happen again."

"You have my word on it." Marbrand seemed visibly relieved to be ahorse again, wearing the smoke-grey cloak of his own House instead of the gold wool of the City Watch. "If any foe should come within a dozen leagues, you will know of them beforehand."

Jaime had given stern commands that no man was to depart the column without his leave. Elsewise, he knew he would have bored young lordlings racing through the fields, scattering livestock and trampling down the crops. There were still cows and sheep to be seen near the city; apples on the trees and berries in the brush, stands of barleycorn and oats and winter wheat, wayns and oxcarts on the road. Farther afield, things would not be so rosy.

Riding at the front of the host with Ser Ilyn silent by his side, Jaime felt almost content. The sun was warm on his back and the wind riffled through his hair like a woman's fingers. When Little Lew Piper came galloping up with a helm full of blackberries, Jaime ate a handful and told the boy to share the rest with his fellow squires and Ser Ilyn Payne.

Payne seemed as comfortable in his silence as in his rusted ringmail and boiled leather. The clop of his gelding's hooves and the rattle of sword in scabbard whenever he shifted his seat were the only sounds he made. Though his pox-scarred face was grim and his eyes as cold as ice on a winter lake, Jaime sensed that he was glad he'd come. *I gave the man a choice*, he reminded himself. *He could have refused me and remained King's Justice.*

Ser Ilyn's appointment had been a wedding gift from Robert Baratheon to the father of his bride, a sinecure to compensate Payne for the tongue he'd lost in the service of House Lannister. He made a splendid headsman. He had never botched an execution, and seldom required as much as a second stroke. And there was something about his silence that inspired terror. Seldom had a King's Justice seemed so well fitted for his office.

When Jaime decided to take him, he had sought out Ser Ilyn's chambers at the end of Traitor's Walk. The upper floor of the squat, half-round tower was divided into cells for prisoners who required some measure of comfort, captive knights or lordlings awaiting ransom or exchange. The entrance to the dungeons proper was at ground level, behind a door of hammered iron and a second of splintery grey wood. On the floors between were rooms set aside for the use of the Chief Gaoler, the Lord Confessor, and the King's Justice. The Justice was a headsman, but by tradition he also had charge of the dungeons and the men who kept them.

And for that task, Ser Ilyn Payne was singularly ill suited. As he could neither read, nor write, nor speak, Ser Ilyn had left the running of the dungeons to his underlings, such as they were. The realm had not had a Lord Confessor since the second Daeron, however, and the last Chief Gaoler had been a cloth merchant who purchased the office from Littlefinger during Robert's reign. No doubt he'd had good profit from it for a few years, until he made the error of conspiring with some other rich fools to give the Iron Throne to Stannis. They called themselves "Antler Men," so Joff had nailed antlers to their heads before flinging them over the city walls. So it had been left to Rennifer Longwaters, the head undergaoler with the twisted back who claimed at tedious length to have a "drop of dragon" in him, to unlock the dungeon doors for Jaime and conduct him up the narrow steps inside the walls to the place where Ilyn Payne had lived for fifteen years.

The chambers stank of rotted food, and the rushes were crawling with vermin. As Jaime entered, he almost trod upon a rat. Payne's greatsword rested on a trestle table, beside a whetstone and a greasy oilcloth. The steel was immaculate, the edge glimmering blue in the pale light, but elsewhere piles of soiled clothing were strewn about the floors, and the bits of mail and armor scattered here and there were red with rust. Jaime could not count the broken wine jars. *The man cares for naught but killing*, he thought, as Ser Ilyn emerged from a bedchamber that reeked of overflowing chamber pots. "His Grace bids me win back his riverlands," Jaime told him. "I would have you with me... if you can bear to give up all of this."

Silence was his answer, and a long, unblinking stare. But just as he was about to turn and take his leave, Payne had given him a nod. *And here he rides*. Jaime glanced at his companion. *Perhaps there is yet hope for the both of us*.

That night they made camp beneath the hilltop castle of the Hayfords. As the sun went down, a hundred tents sprouted beneath the hill, along the banks of the stream that ran beside it. Jaime set the sentries himself. He did not expect trouble this close to the city, but his uncle Stafford had once thought himself safe on the Oxcross too. It was best to take no chances.

When the invitation came down from the castle for him to sup with Lady Hayford's castellan, Jaime took Ser Ilyn with him, along with Ser Addam Marbrand, Ser Bonifer Hasty, Red Ronnet Connington, Strongboar, and a dozen other knights and lordlings. "I suppose I ought to wear the hand," he said to Peck before making his ascent.

The lad fetched it straightaway. The hand was wrought of gold, very lifelike, with inlaid nails of mother-of-pearl, its fingers and thumb half closed so as to slip around a goblet's stem. *I cannot fight, but I can drink*, Jaime reflected as the lad was tightening the straps that bound it to his stump. "Men shall name you Goldenhand from this day forth, my lord," the armorer had assured him the first time he'd fitted it onto Jaime's wrist. *He was wrong. I shall be the Kingslayer till I die.*

The golden hand was the occasion for much admiring comment over supper, at least until Jaime knocked over a goblet of wine. Then his temper got the best of him. "If you admire the bloody thing so much, lop off your own sword hand and you can have it," he told Flement Brax. After that there was no more talk about his hand, and he managed to drink some wine in peace.

The lady of the castle was a Lannister by marriage, a plump toddler who had been wed to his cousin Tyrek before she was a year old. Lady Ermesande was duly trotted out for their approval, all trussed up in a little gown of cloth-of-gold, with the green fretty and green pale wavy of House Hayford rendered in tiny beads of jade. But soon enough the girl began to squall, whereupon she was promptly whisked off to bed by her wet nurse.

"Has there been no word of our Lord Tyrek?" her castellan asked as a course of trout was served.

"None." Tyrek Lannister had vanished during the riots in King's Landing whilst Jaime himself was still captive at Riverrun. The boy would be fourteen by now, assuming he was still alive.

"I led a search myself, at Lord Tywin's command," offered Addam Marbrand as he boned his fish, "but I found no more than Bywater had before me. The boy was last seen ahorse, when the press of the mob broke the line of gold cloaks. Afterward... well, his palfrey was found, but not the

rider. Most like they pulled him down and slew him. But if that's so, where is his body? The mob let the other corpses lie, why not his?"

"He would be of more value alive," suggested Strongboar. "Any Lannister would bring a hefty ransom."

"No doubt," Marbrand agreed, "yet no ransom demand was ever made. The boy is simply gone."

"The boy is dead." Jaime had drunk three cups of wine, and his golden hand seemed to be growing heavier and clumsier by the moment. *A hook would serve me just as well.* "If they realized whom they'd killed, no doubt they threw him in the river for fear of my father's wrath. They know the taste of that in King's Landing. Lord Tywin always paid his debts."

"Always," Strongboar agreed, and that was the end of that.

Yet afterward, alone in the tower room he had been offered for the night, Jaime found himself wondering. Tyrek had served King Robert as a squire, side by side with Lancel. Knowledge could be more valuable than gold, more deadly than a dagger. It was Varys he thought of then, smiling and smelling of lavender. The eunuch had agents and informers all over the city. It would have been a simple matter for him to arrange to have Tyrek snatched during the confusion... provided he knew beforehand that the mob was like to riot. *And Varys knew all, or so he would have us believe. Yet he gave Cersei no warning of that riot. Nor did he ride down to the ships to see Myrcella off.*

He opened the shutters. The night was growing cold, and a horned moon rode the sky. His hand shone dully in its light. *No good for throttling eunuchs, but heavy enough to smash that slimy smile into a fine red ruin.* He wanted to hit someone.

Jaime found Ser Ilyn honing his greatsword. "It's time," he told the man. The headsman rose and followed, his cracked leather boots scraping against the steep stone steps as they went down the stair. A small courtyard opened off the armory. Jaime found two shields there, two halfhelms, and a pair of blunted tourney swords. He offered one to Payne and took the other in his left hand as he slid his right through the loops of the shield. His golden fingers were curved enough to hook, but could not grasp, so his hold

upon the shield was loose. “You were a knight once, ser,” Jaime said. “So was I. Let us see what we are now.”

Ser Ilyn raised his blade in reply, and Jaime moved at once to the attack. Payne was as rusty as his ringmail, and not so strong as Brienne, yet he met every cut with his own blade, or interposed his shield. They danced beneath the horned moon as the blunted swords sang their steely song. The silent knight was content to let Jaime lead the dance for a while, but finally he began to answer stroke for stroke. Once he shifted to the attack, he caught Jaime on the thigh, on the shoulder, on the forearm. Thrice he made his head ring with cuts to the helm. One slash ripped the shield off his right arm, and almost burst the straps that bound his golden hand to his stump. By the time they lowered their swords he was bruised and battered, but the wine had burned away and his head was clear. “We will dance again,” he promised Ser Ilyn. “On the morrow, and the morrow. Every day we’ll dance, till I am as good with my left hand as ever I was with the right.”

Ser Ilyn opened his mouth and made a clacking sound. *A laugh*, Jaime realized. Something twisted in his gut.

Come morning, none of the others was so bold as to make mention of his bruises. Not one of them had heard the sound of swordplay in the night, it would seem. Yet when they climbed back down to camp, Little Lew Piper voiced the question the knights and lordlings dared not ask. Jaime grinned at him. “They have lusty wenches in House Hayford. These are love bites, lad.”

Another bright and blustery day was followed by a cloudy one, then three days of rain. Wind and water made no matter. The column kept its pace, north along the kingsroad, and each night Jaime found some private place to win himself more love bites. They fought inside a stable as a one-eyed mule looked on, and in the cellar of an inn amongst the casks of wine and ale. They fought in the blackened shell of a big stone barn, on a wooded island in a shallow stream, and in an open field as the rain pattered softly against their helms and shields.

Jaime made excuses for his nightly forays, but he was not so foolish as to think that they were believed. Addam Marbrand knew what he was

about, surely, and some of his other captains must have suspected. But no one spoke of it in his hearing... and since the only witness lacked a tongue, he need not fear anyone learning just how inept a swordsman the Kingslayer had become.

Soon the signs of war could be seen on every hand. Weeds and thorns and brushy trees grew high as a horse's head in fields where autumn wheat should be ripening, the kingsroad was bereft of travelers, and wolves ruled the weary world from dusk till dawn. Most of the animals were wary enough to keep their distance, but one of Marbrand's outriders had his horse run off and killed when he dismounted for a piss. "No beast would be so bold," declared Ser Bonifer the Good, of the stern sad face. "These are demons in the skins of wolves, sent to chastise us for our sins."

"This must have been an uncommonly sinful horse," Jaime said, standing over what remained of the poor animal. He gave orders for the rest of the carcass to be cut apart and salted down; it might be they would need the meat.

At a place called Sow's Horn they found a tough old knight named Ser Roger Hogg squatting stubbornly in his towerhouse with six men-at-arms, four crossbowmen, and a score of peasants. Ser Roger was as big and bristly as his name and Ser Kennos suggested that he might be some lost Crakehall, since their sigil was a brindled boar. Strongboar seemed to believe it and spent an earnest hour questioning Ser Roger about his ancestors.

Jaime was more interested in what Hogg had to say of wolves. "We had some trouble with a band of them white star wolves," the old knight told him. "They come round sniffing after you, my lord, but we saw them off, and buried three down by the turnips. Before them there was a pack of bloody lions, begging your pardon. The one who led them had a mantichore on his shield."

"Ser Amory Lorch," Jaime offered. "My lord father commanded him to harry the riverlands."

"Which we're no part of," Ser Roger Hogg said stoutly. "My fealty's owed to House Hayford, and Lady Ermesande bends her little knee at

King's Landing, or will when she's old enough to walk. I told him that, but this Lorch wasn't much for listening. He slaughtered half my sheep and three good milk goats, and tried to roast me in my tower. My walls are solid stone and eight feet thick, though, so after his fire burned out he rode off bored. The wolves come later, the ones on four legs. They ate the sheep the manticore left me. I got a few good pelts in recompense, but fur don't fill your belly. What should we do, my lord?"

"Plant," said Jaime, "and pray for one last harvest." It was not a hopeful answer, but it was the only one he had.

The next day, the column crossed the stream that formed the boundary between the lands that did fealty to King's Landing and those beholden to Riverrun. Maester Gulian consulted a map and announced that these hills were held by the brothers Wode, a pair of landed knights sworn to Harrenhal... but *their* halls had been earth and timber, and only blackened beams remained of them.

No Wodes appeared, nor any of their smallfolk, though some outlaws had taken shelter in the root cellar beneath the second brother's keep. One of them wore the ruins of a crimson cloak, but Jaime hanged him with the rest. It felt good. This was justice. *Make a habit of it, Lannister, and one day men might call you Goldenhand after all. Goldenhand the Just.*

The world grew ever greyer as they drew near to Harrenhal. They rode beneath slate skies, beside waters that shone old and cold as a sheet of beaten steel. Jaime found himself wondering if Brienne might have passed this way before him. *If she thought that Sansa Stark had made for Riverrun...* Had they encountered other travelers, he might have stopped to ask if any of them had chance to see a pretty maid with auburn hair, or a big ugly one with a face that would curdle milk. But there was no one on the roads but wolves, and their howling held no answers.

Across the pewter waters of the lake the towers of Black Harren's folly appeared at last, five twisted fingers of black, misshapen stone grasping for the sky. Though Littlefinger had been named the Lord of Harrenhal, he seemed in no great haste to occupy his new seat, so it had fallen to Jaime Lannister to "sort out" Harrenhal on his way to Riverrun.

That it needed sorting out he did not doubt. Gregor Clegane had wrested the immense, gloomy castle away from the Bloody Mummern before Cersei recalled him to King's Landing. No doubt the Mountain's men were still rattling around inside like so many dried peas in a suit of plate, but they were not ideally suited to restore the king's peace to the Trident. The only peace Ser Gregor's lot had ever given anyone was the peace of the grave.

Ser Addam's outriders had reported that the gates of Harrenhal were closed and barred. Jaime drew his men up before them and commanded Ser Kennos of Kayce to sound the Horn of Herrock, black and twisted and banded in old gold.

When three blasts had echoed off the walls, they heard the groan of iron hinges and the gates swung slowly open. So thick were the walls of Black Harren's folly that Jaime passed beneath a dozen murder holes before emerging into sudden sunlight in the yard where he'd bid farewell to the Bloody Mummern, not so long ago. Weeds were sprouting from the hard-packed earth, and flies buzzed about the carcass of a horse.

A handful of Ser Gregor's men emerged from the towers to watch him dismount; hard-eyed, hard-mouthed men, the lot of them. *They would have to be, to ride beside the Mountain.* About the best that could be said for Gregor's men was that they were not quite as vile and violent a bunch as the Brave Companions. "Fuck me, Jaime Lannister," blurted one grey and grizzled man-at-arms. "It's the bleeding Kingslayer, boys. Fuck me with a spear!"

"Who might you be?" Jaime asked.

"Ser used to call me Shitmouth, if it please m'lord." He spit in his hands and wiped his cheeks with them, as if that would somehow make him more presentable.

"Charming. Do you command here?"

"Me? Shit, no. M'lord. Bugger me with a bloody spear." Shitmouth had enough crumbs in his beard to feed the garrison. Jaime had to laugh. The man took that for encouragement. "Bugger me with a bloody spear," he said again, and started laughing too.

“You heard the man,” Jaime said to Ilyn Payne. “Find a nice long spear, and shove it up his arse.”

Ser Ilyn did not have a spear, but Beardless Jon Bettley was glad to toss him one. Shitmouth’s drunken laughter stopped abruptly. “You keep that bloody thing away from me.”

“Make up your mind,” said Jaime. “Who has the command here? Did Ser Gregor name a castellan?”

“Polliver,” another man said, “only the Hound killed him, m’lord. Him and the Tickler both, and that Sarsfield boy.”

The Hound again. “You know it was Sandor? You saw him?”

“Not us, m’lord. That innkeep told us.”

“It happened at the crossroads inn, my lord.” The speaker was a younger man with a mop of sandy hair. He wore the chain of coins that had once belonged to Vargo Hoat; coins from half a hundred distant cities, silver and gold, copper and bronze, square coins and round coins, triangles and rings and bits of bone. “The innkeep swore the man had one side of his face all burned. His whores told the same tale. Sandor had some boy with him, a ragged peasant lad. They hacked Polly and the Tickler to bloody bits and rode off down the Trident, we were told.”

“Did you send men after them?”

Shitmouth frowned, as if the thought were painful. “No, m’lord. Fuck us all, we never did.”

“When a dog goes mad you cut his throat.”

“Well,” the man said, rubbing his mouth, “I never much liked Polly, that shit, and the dog, he were Ser’s brother, so...”

“We’re bad, m’lord,” broke in the man who wore the coins, “but you’d need to be mad to face the Hound.”

Jaime looked him over. Bolder than the rest, and not as drunk as Shitmouth. “You were afraid of him.”

“I wouldn’t say *afraid*, m’lord. I’d say we was leaving him for our betters. Someone like Ser. Or you.”

Me, when I had two hands. Jaime did not delude himself. Sandor would make short work of him now. “You have a name?”

“Rafford, if it pleases. Most call me Raff.”

“Raff, gather the garrison together in the Hall of a Hundred Hearths. Your captives as well. I’ll want to see them. Those whores from the crossroads too. Oh, and Hoat. I was distraught to hear that he had died. I’d like to look upon his head.”

When they brought it to him, he found that the Goat’s lips had been sliced off, along with his ears and most of his nose. The crows had supped upon his eyes. It was still recognizably Hoat, however. Jaime would have known his beard anywhere; an absurd rope of hair two feet long, dangling from a pointed chin. Elsewise, only a few leathery strips of flesh still clung to the Qohorik’s skull. “Where is the rest of him?” he asked.

No one wanted to tell him. Finally, Shitmouth lowered his eyes, and muttered, “Rotted, ser. And et.”

“One of the captives was always begging food,” Rafford admitted, “so Ser said to give him roast goat. The Qohorik didn’t have much meat on him, though. Ser took his hands and feet first, then his arms and legs.”

“The fat bugger got most, m’lord,” Shitmouth offered, “but Ser, he said to see that all the captives had a taste. And Hoat too, his own self. That whoreson ’ud slobber when we fed him, and the grease’d run down into that skinny beard o’ his.”

Father, Jaime thought, *your dogs have both gone mad.* He found himself remembering tales he had first heard as a child at Casterly Rock, of mad Lady Lothston who bathed in tubs of blood and presided over feasts of human flesh within these very walls.

Somehow revenge had lost its savor. “Take this and throw it in the lake.” Jaime tossed Hoat’s head to Peck, and turned to address the garrison. “Until such time as Lord Petyr arrives to claim his seat, Ser Bonifer Hasty shall hold Harrenhal in the name of the crown. Those of you who wish may join him, if he’ll have you. The rest will ride with me to Riverrun.”

The Mountain's men looked at one another. "We're owed," said one. "Ser promised us. Rich rewards, he said."

"His very words," Shitmouth agreed. "*Rich rewards, for them as rides with me.*" A dozen others began to yammer their assent.

Ser Bonifer raised a gloved hand. "Any man who remains with me shall have a hide of land to work, a second hide when he takes a wife, a third at the birth of his first child."

"Land, ser?" Shitmouth spat. "Piss on that. If we wanted to grub in the bloody dirt, we could have bloody well stayed home, begging your pardon, ser. *Rich rewards*, Ser said. Meaning gold."

"If you have a grievance, go to King's Landing and take it up with my sweet sister." Jaime turned to Rafford. "I'll see those captives now. Starting with Ser Wylis Manderly."

"He the fat one?" asked Rafford.

"I devoutly hope so. And tell me no sad stories of how he died, or the lot of you are apt to do the same."

Any hopes he might have nursed of finding Shagwell, Pyg, or Zollo languishing in the dungeons were sadly disappointed. The Brave Companions had abandoned Vargo Hoat to a man, it would seem. Of Lady Whent's people, only three remained—the cook who had opened the postern gate for Ser Gregor, a bent-back armorer called Ben Blackthumb, and a girl named Pia, who was not near as pretty as she had been when Jaime saw her last. Someone had broken her nose and knocked out half her teeth. The girl fell at Jaime's feet when she saw him, sobbing and clinging to his leg with hysterical strength till Strongboar pulled her off. "No one will hurt you now," he told her, but that only made her sob the louder.

The other captives had been better treated. Ser Wylis Manderly was amongst them, along with several other highborn northmen taken prisoner by the Mountain That Rides in the fighting at the fords of the Trident. Useful hostages, all worth a goodly ransom. They were ragged, filthy, and shaggy to a man, and some had fresh bruises, cracked teeth, and missing fingers, but their wounds had been washed and bandaged, and none of them

had gone hungry. Jaime wondered if they had any inkling what they'd been eating, and decided it was better not to inquire.

None had any defiance left; especially not Ser Wylis, a bushy-faced tub of suet with dull eyes and sallow, sagging jowls. When Jaime told him that he would be escorted to Maidenpool and there put on a ship for White Harbor, Ser Wylis collapsed into a puddle on the floor and sobbed longer and louder than Pia had. It took four men to lift him back onto his feet. *Too much roast goat*, Jaime reflected. *Gods, but I hate this bloody castle*. Harrenhal had seen more horror in its three hundred years than Casterly Rock had witnessed in three thousand.

Jaime commanded that fires be lit in the Hall of a Hundred Hearths and sent the cook hobbling back to the kitchens to prepare a hot meal for the men of his column. "Anything but goat."

He took his own supper in Hunter's Hall with Ser Bonifer Hasty, a solemn stork of a man prone to salting his speech with appeals to the Seven. "I want none of Ser Gregor's followers," he declared as he was cutting up a pear as withered as he was, so as to make certain that its nonexistent juice did not stain his pristine purple doublet, embroidered with the white bend cotised of his House. "I will not have such sinners in my service."

"My septon used to say all men were sinners."

"He was not wrong," Ser Bonifer allowed, "but some sins are blacker than others, and fouler in the nostrils of the Seven."

And you have no more nose than my little brother, or my own sins would have you choking on that pear. "Very well. I'll take Gregor's lot off your hands." He could always find a use for fighters. If nothing else, he could send them up the ladders first, should he need to storm the walls of Riverrun.

"Take the whore as well," Ser Bonifer urged. "You know the one. The girl from the dungeons."

"Pia." The last time he had been here, Qyburn had sent the girl to his bed, thinking that would please him. But the Pia they had brought up from the dungeons was a different creature from the sweet, simple, giggly

creature who'd crawled beneath his blankets. She had made the mistake of speaking when Ser Gregor wanted quiet, so the Mountain had smashed her teeth to splinters with a mailed fist and broken her pretty little nose as well. He would have done worse, no doubt, if Cersei had not called him down to King's Landing to face the Red Viper's spear. Jaime would not mourn him. "Pia was born in this castle," he told Ser Bonifer. "It is the only home she has ever known."

"She is a font of corruption," said Ser Bonifer. "I won't have her near my men, flaunting her... parts."

"I expect her flaunting days are done," he said, "but if you find her that objectionable, I'll take her." He could make her a washerwoman, he supposed. His squires did not mind raising his tent, grooming his horse, or cleaning his armor, but the task of caring for his clothes struck them as unmanly. "Can you hold Harrenhal with just your Holy Hundred?" Jaime asked. They should actually be called the Holy Eighty-Six, having lost fourteen men upon the Blackwater, but no doubt Ser Bonifer would fill up his ranks again as soon as he found some sufficiently pious recruits.

"I anticipate no difficulty. The Crone will light our way, and the Warrior will give strength to our arms."

Or else the Stranger will turn up for the whole holy lot of you. Jaime could not be certain who had convinced his sister that Ser Bonifer should be named castellan of Harrenhal, but the appointment smelled of Orton Merryweather. Hasty had once served Merryweather's grandsire, he seemed to recall dimly. And the carrot-haired justiciar was just the sort of simpleminded fool to assume that someone called "the Good" was the very potion the riverlands required to heal the wounds left by Roose Bolton, Vargo Hoat, and Gregor Clegane.

But he might not be wrong. Hasty hailed from the stormlands, so had neither friends nor foes along the Trident; no blood feuds, no debts to pay, no cronies to reward. He was sober, just, and dutiful, and his Holy Eighty-Six were as well disciplined as any soldiers in the Seven Kingdoms, and made a lovely sight as they wheeled and pranced their tall grey geldings.

Littlefinger had once quipped that Ser Bonifer must have gelded the riders too, so spotless was their repute.

All the same, Jaime wondered about any soldiers who were better known for their lovely horses than for the foes they'd slain. *They pray well, I suppose, but can they fight?* They had not disgraced themselves on the Blackwater, so far as he knew, but they had not distinguished themselves either. Ser Bonifer himself had been a promising knight in his youth, but something had happened to him, a defeat or a disgrace or a near brush with death, and afterward he had decided that jousting was an empty vanity and put away his lance for good and all.

Harrenhal must be held, though, and Baelor Butthole here is the man that Cersei chose to hold it. “This castle has an ill repute,” he warned him, “and one that’s well deserved. It’s said that Harren and his sons still walk the halls by night, afire. Those who look upon them burst into flame.”

“I fear no shade, ser. It is written in *The Seven-Pointed Star* that spirits, wights, and revenants cannot harm a pious man, so long as he is armored in his faith.”

“Then armor yourself in faith, by all means, but wear a suit of mail and plate as well. Every man who holds this castle seems to come to a bad end. The Mountain, the Goat, even my father...”

“If you will forgive my saying so, they were not godly men, as we are. The Warrior defends us, and help is always near, if some dread foe should threaten. Maester Gulian will be remaining with his ravens, Lord Lancel is nearby at Darry with his garrison, and Lord Randyll holds Maidenpool. Together we three shall hunt down and destroy whatever outlaws prowl these parts. Once that is done, the Seven will guide the goodfolk back to their villages to plow and plant and build anew.”

The ones the Goat didn’t kill, at least. Jaime hooked his golden fingers round the stem of his wine goblet. “If any of Hoat’s Brave Companions fall into your hands, send word to me at once.” The Stranger might have made off with the Goat before Jaime could get around to him, but fat Zollo was still out there, with Shagwell, Rorge, Faithful Urswyck, and the rest.

“So you can torture them and kill them?”

“I suppose you would forgive them, in my place?”

“If they made sincere repentance for their sins... yes, I would embrace them all as brothers and pray with them before I sent them to the block. Sins may be forgiven. Crimes require punishment.” Hasty folded his hands before him like a steeple, in a way that reminded Jaime uncomfortably of his father. “If it is Sandor Clegane that we encounter, what would you have me do?”

Pray hard, Jaime thought, *and run*. “Send him to join his beloved brother and be glad the gods made seven hells. One would never be enough to hold both of the Cleganes.” He pushed himself awkwardly to his feet. “Beric Dondarrion is a different matter. Should you capture him, hold him for my return. I’ll want to march him back to King’s Landing with a rope about his neck, and have Ser Ilyn take his head off where half the realm can see.”

“And this Myrish priest who runs with him? It is said he spreads his false faith everywhere.”

“Kill him, kiss him, or pray with him, as you please.”

“I have no wish to kiss the man, my lord.”

“No doubt he’d say the same of you.” Jaime’s smile turned into a yawn. “My pardons. I shall take my leave of you, if you have no objections.”

“None, my lord,” said Hasty. No doubt he wished to pray.

Jaime wished to fight. He took the steps two at a time, out to where the night air was cold and crisp. In the torchlit yard Strongboar and Ser Flement Brax were having at each other whilst a ring of men-at-arms cheered them on. *Ser Lyle will have the best of that one*, he knew. *I need to find Ser Ilyn*. His fingers had the itch again. His footsteps took him away from the noise and the light. He passed beneath the covered bridge and through the Flowstone Yard before he realized where he was headed.

As he neared the bear pit, he saw the glow of a lantern, its pale wintry light washing over the tiers of steep stone seats. *Someone has come before me, it would seem*. The pit would be a fine place to dance; perhaps Ser Ilyn had anticipated him.

But the knight standing over the pit was bigger; a husky, bearded man in a red-and-white surcoat adorned with griffins. *Connington. What's he doing here?* Below, the carcass of the bear still sprawled upon the sands, though only bones and ragged fur remained, half-buried. Jaime felt a pang of pity for the beast. *At least he died in battle.* “Ser Ronnet,” he called, “have you lost your way? It is a large castle, I know.”

Red Ronnet raised his lantern. “I wished to see where the bear danced with the maiden not-so-fair.” His beard shone in the light as if it were afire. Jaime could smell wine on his breath. “Is it true the wench fought naked?”

“Naked? No.” He wondered how that wrinkle had been added to the story. “The Mummers put her in a pink silk gown and shoved a tourney sword into her hand. The Goat wanted her death to be *amuthing*. Elsewise...”

“...the sight of Brienne naked might have made the bear flee in terror.” Connington laughed.

Jaime did not. “You speak as if you know the lady.”

“I was betrothed to her.”

That took him by surprise. Brienne had never mentioned a betrothal. “Her father made a match for her...”

“Thrice,” said Connington. “I was the second. My father’s notion. I had heard the wench was ugly, and I told him so, but he said all women were the same once you blew the candle out.”

“Your father.” Jaime eyed Red Ronnet’s surcoat, where two griffins faced each other on a field of red and white. *Dancing griffins.* “Our late Hand’s... brother, was he?”

“Cousin. Lord Jon had no brothers.”

“No.” It all came back to him. Jon Connington had been Prince Rhaegar’s friend. When Merryweather failed so dismally to contain Robert’s Rebellion and Prince Rhaegar could not be found, Aerys had turned to the next best thing, and raised Connington to the Handship. But the Mad King was always chopping off his Hands. He had chopped Lord Jon after the Battle of the Bells, stripping him of honors, lands, and wealth,

and packing him off across the sea to die in exile, where he soon drank himself to death. The cousin, though—Red Ronnet’s father—had joined the rebellion and been rewarded with Griffin’s Roost after the Trident. He only got the castle, though; Robert kept the gold, and bestowed the greater part of the Connington lands on more fervent supporters.

Ser Ronnet was a landed knight, no more. For any such, the Maid of Tarth would have been a sweet plum indeed. “How is it that you did not wed?” Jaime asked him.

“Why, I went to Tarth and saw her. I had six years on her, yet the wench could look me in the eye. She was a sow in silk, though most sows have bigger teats. When she tried to talk she almost choked on her own tongue. I gave her a rose and told her it was all that she would ever have from me.” Connington glanced into the pit. “The bear was less hairy than that freak, I’ll—”

Jaime’s golden hand cracked him across the mouth so hard the other knight went stumbling down the steps. His lantern fell and smashed, and the oil spread out, burning. “You are speaking of a highborn lady, ser. Call her by her name. Call her Brienne.”

Connington edged away from the spreading flames on his hands and knees. “Brienne. If it please my lord.” He spat a glob of blood at Jaime’s foot. “Brienne the Beauty.”