

# JAIME

Raventree Hall was old. Moss grew thick between its ancient stones, spiderwebbing up its walls like the veins in a crone's legs. Two huge towers flanked the castle's main gate, and smaller ones defended every angle of its walls. All were square. Drum towers and half-moons held up better against catapults, since thrown stones were more apt to deflect off a curved wall, but Raventree predated that particular bit of builder's wisdom.

The castle dominated the broad fertile valley that maps and men alike called Blackwood Vale. A vale it was, beyond a doubt, but no wood had grown here for several thousand years, be it black or brown or green. Once, yes, but axes had long since cleared the trees away. Homes and mills and holdfasts had risen where once the oaks stood tall. The ground was bare and muddy, and dotted here and there with drifts of melting snow.

Inside the castle walls, however, a bit of the forest still remained. House Blackwood kept the old gods, and worshiped as the First Men had in the days before the Andals came to Westeros. Some of the trees in their godswood were said to be as old as Raventree's square towers, especially the heart tree, a weirwood of colossal size whose upper branches could be seen from leagues away, like bony fingers scratching at the sky.

As Jaime Lannister and his escort wound through the rolling hills into the vale, little remained of the fields and farms and orchards that had once surrounded Raventree—only mud and ashes, and here and there the blackened shells of homes and mills. Weeds and thorns and nettles grew in that wasteland, but nothing that could be called a crop. Everywhere Jaime looked he saw his father's hand, even in the bones they sometimes glimpsed beside the road. Most were sheep bones, but there were horses too, and cattle, and now and again a human skull, or a headless skeleton with weeds poking up through its rib cage.

No great hosts encircled Raventree, as Riverrun had been encircled. This siege was a more intimate affair, the latest step in a dance that went back many centuries. At best Jonos Bracken had five hundred men about the

castle. Jaime saw no siege towers, no battering rams, no catapults. Bracken did not mean to break the gates of Raventree nor storm its high, thick walls. With no prospect of relief in sight, he was content to starve his rival out. No doubt there had been sorties and skirmishes at the start of the siege, and arrows flying back and forth; half a year into it, everyone was too tired for such nonsense. Boredom and routine had taken over, the enemies of discipline.

*Past time this was ended*, thought Jaime Lannister. With Riverrun now safely in Lannister hands, Raventree was the remnant of the Young Wolf's short-lived kingdom. Once it yielded, his work along the Trident would be done, and he would be free to return to King's Landing. *To the king*, he told himself, but another part of him whispered, *to Cersei*.

He would have to face her, he supposed. Assuming the High Septon had not put her to death by the time he got back to the city. "*Come at once*," she had written, in the letter he'd had Peck burn at Riverrun. "*Help me. Save me. I need you now as I have never needed you before. I love you. I love you. I love you. Come at once.*" Her need was real enough, Jaime did not doubt. As for the rest ... *she's been fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and Moon Boy for all I know* ... Even if he had gone back, he could not hope to save her. She was guilty of every treason laid against her, and he was short a sword hand.

When the column came trotting from the fields, the sentries stared at them with more curiosity than fear. No one sounded the alarm, which suited Jaime well enough. Lord Bracken's pavilion did not prove difficult to find. It was the largest in the camp, and the best sited; sitting atop a low rise beside a stream, it commanded a clear view of two of Raventree's gates.

The tent was brown, like the standard flapping from its center pole, where the red stallion of House Bracken reared upon its gold escutcheon. Jaime gave the order to dismount and told his men that they might mingle if they liked. "Not you two," he said to his banner-bearers. "Stay close. This will not keep me long." Jaime vaulted down off Honor and strode to Bracken's tent, his sword rattling in its scabbard.

The guards outside the tent flap exchanged an anxious look at his approach. “My lord,” said one. “Shall we announce you?”

“I’ll announce myself.” Jaime pushed aside the flap with his golden hand and ducked inside.

They were well and truly at it when he entered, so intent on their rutting that neither took any note of his arrival. The woman had her eyes closed. Her hands clutched the coarse brown hair on Bracken’s back. She gasped every time he drove into her. His lordship’s head was buried in her breasts, his hands locked around her hips. Jaime cleared his throat. “Lord Jonos.”

The woman’s eyes flew open, and she gave a startled shriek. Jonos Bracken rolled off her, grabbed for his scabbard, and came up with naked steel in hand, cursing. “*Seven bloody hells*,” he started, “*who dares*—” Then he saw Jaime’s white cloak and golden breastplate. His swordpoint dropped. “Lannister?”

“I am sorry to disturb you at your pleasure, my lord,” said Jaime, with a half-smile, “but I am in some haste. May we talk?”

“Talk. Aye.” Lord Jonos sheathed his sword. He was not quite so tall as Jaime, but he was heavier, with thick shoulders and arms that would have made a blacksmith envious. Brown stubble covered his cheeks and chin. His eyes were brown as well, the anger in them poorly hidden. “You took me unawares, my lord. I was not told of your coming.”

“And I seem to have prevented yours.” Jaime smiled at the woman in the bed. She had one hand over her left breast and the other between her legs, which left her right breast exposed. Her nipples were darker than Cersei’s and thrice the size. When she felt Jaime’s gaze she covered her right nipple, but that revealed her mound. “Are all camp followers so modest?” he wondered. “If a man wants to sell his turnips, he needs to set them out.”

“You been looking at my turnips since you came in, ser.” The woman found the blanket and pulled it up high enough to cover herself to the waist, then raised one hand to push her hair back from her eyes. “And they’re not for sale, neither.”

Jaime gave a shrug. “My apologies if I mistook you for something you’re not. My little brother has known a hundred whores, I’m sure, but I’ve only ever bedded one.”

“She’s a prize of war.” Bracken retrieved his breeches from the floor and shook them out. “She belonged to one of Blackwood’s sworn swords till I split his head in two. Put your hands down, woman. My lord of Lannister wants a proper look at those teats.”

Jaime ignored that. “You are putting those breeches on backwards, my lord,” he told Bracken. As Jonos cursed, the woman slipped off the bed to snatch up her scattered clothing, her fingers fluttering nervously between her breasts and cleft as she bent and turned and reached. Her efforts to conceal herself were oddly provocative, far more so than if she’d simply gone about the business naked. “Do you have a name, woman?” he asked her.

“My mother named me Hildy, ser.” She pulled a soiled shift down over her head and shook her hair out. Her face was almost as dirty as her feet and she had enough hair between her legs to pass for Bracken’s sister, but there was something appealing about her all the same. That pug nose, her shaggy mane of hair ... or the way she did a little curtsy after she had stepped into her skirt. “Have you seen my other shoe, m’lord?”

The question seemed to vex Lord Bracken. “Am I a bloody handmaid, to fetch you shoes? Go barefoot if you must. Just go.”

“Does that mean m’lord won’t be taking me home with him, to pray with his little wife?” Laughing, Hildy gave Jaime a brazen look. “Do you have a little wife, ser?”

*No, I have a sister.* “What color is my cloak?”

“White,” she said, “but your hand is solid gold. I like that in a man. And what is it you like in a woman, m’lord?”

“Innocence.”

“In a woman, I said. Not a daughter.”

He thought of Myrcella. *I will need to tell her too.* The Dornishmen might not like that. Doran Martell had betrothed her to his son in the belief that she was Robert’s blood. *Knots and tangles*, Jaime thought, wishing he could cut through all of it with one swift stroke of his sword. “I have sworn a vow,” he told Hildy wearily.

“No turnips for you, then,” the girl said, saucily. “*Get out*,” Lord Jonos roared at her.

She did. But as she slipped past Jaime, clutching one shoe and a pile of her clothes, she reached down and gave his cock a squeeze through his breeches. “*Hildy*,” she reminded him, before she darted half-clothed from the tent.

*Hildy*, Jaime mused. “And how fares your lady wife?” he asked Lord Jonos when the girl was gone.

“How would I know? Ask her septon. When your father burned our castle, she decided the gods were punishing us. Now all she does is pray.” Jonos had finally gotten his breeches turned the right way round and was lacing them up the front. “What brings you here, my lord? The Blackfish? We heard how he escaped.”

“Did you?” Jaime settled on a camp stool. “From the man himself, perchance?”

“Ser Brynden knows better than to come running to me. I am fond of the man, I won’t deny that. That won’t stop me clapping him in chains if he shows his face near me or mine. He knows I’ve bent the knee. He should have done the same, but he always was a stubborn one. His brother could have told you that.”

“Tytos Blackwood has not bent the knee,” Jaime pointed out. “Might the Blackfish seek refuge at Raventree?”

“He might seek it, but to find it he’d need to get past my siege lines, and last I heard he hadn’t grown wings. Tytos will be needing refuge himself before much longer. They’re down to rats and roots in there. He’ll yield before the next full moon.”

“He’ll yield before the sun goes down. I mean to offer him terms and accept him back into the king’s peace.”

“I see.” Lord Jonos shrugged into a brown woolen tunic with the red stallion of Bracken embroidered on the front. “Will my lord take a horn of ale?”

“No, but don’t go dry on my account.”

Bracken filled a horn for himself, drank half of it, and wiped his mouth. “You spoke of terms. What sort of terms?”

“The usual sort. Lord Blackwood shall be required to confess his treason and abjure his allegiance to the Starks and Tullys. He will swear solemnly before gods and men to henceforth remain a leal vassal of Harrenhal and the Iron Throne, and I will give him pardon in the king’s name. We will take a pot or two of gold, of course. The price of rebellion. I’ll claim a hostage as well, to ensure that Raventree does not rise again.”

“His daughter,” suggested Bracken. “Blackwood has six sons, but only the one daughter. He dotes on her. A snot-nosed little creature, couldn’t be more than seven.”

“Young, but she might serve.”

Lord Jonos drained the last of his ale and tossed the horn aside. “What of the lands and castles we were promised?”

“What lands were these?”

“The east bank of the Widow’s Wash, from Crossbow Ridge to Rutting Meadow, and all the islands in the stream. Grindcorn Mill and Lord’s Mill, the ruins of Muddy Hall, the Ravishment, Battle Valley, Oldforge, the

villages of Buckle, Blackbuckle, Cairns, and Claypool, and the market town at Mudgrave. Waspwood, Lorgen's Wood, Greenhill, and Barba's Teats. Missy's Teats, the Blackwoods call them, but they were Barba's first. Honeytree and all the hives. Here, I've marked them out if my lord would like a look." He rooted about on a table and produced a parchment map.

Jaime took it with his good hand, but he had to use the gold to open it and hold it flat. "This is a deal of land," he observed. "You will be increasing your domains by a quarter."

Bracken's mouth set stubbornly. "All these lands belonged to Stone Hedge once. The Blackwoods stole them from us."

"What about this village here, between the Teats?" Jaime tapped the map with a gilded knuckle.

"Pennytree. That was ours once too, but it's been a royal fief for a hundred years. Leave that out. We ask only for the lands stolen by the Blackwoods. Your lord father promised to restore them to us if we would subdue Lord Tytos for him."

"Yet as I was riding up, I saw Tully banners flying from the castle walls, and the direwolf of Stark as well. That would seem to suggest that Lord Tytos has not been subdued."

"We've driven him and his from the field and penned them up inside Raventree. Give me sufficient men to storm his walls, my lord, and I will subdue the whole lot of them to their graves."

"If I gave you sufficient men, they would be doing the subduing, not you. In which case I should reward myself." Jaime let the map roll up again. "I'll keep this if I might."

"The map is yours. The lands are ours. It's said that a Lannister always pays his debts. We fought for you."

"Not half as long as you fought against us."

“The king has pardoned us for that. I lost my nephew to your swords, and my natural son. Your Mountain stole my harvest and burned everything he could not carry off. He put my castle to the torch and raped one of my daughters. I will have recompense.”

“The Mountain’s dead, as is my father,” Jaime told him, “and some might say your head was recompense enough. You *did* declare for Stark, and kept faith with him until Lord Walder killed him.”

“Murdered him, and a dozen good men of my own blood.” Lord Jonos turned his head and spat. “Aye, I kept faith with the Young Wolf. As I’ll keep faith with you, so long as you treat me fair. I bent the knee because I saw no sense in dying for the dead nor shedding Bracken blood in a lost cause.”

“A prudent man.” *Though some might say that Lord Blackwood has been more honorable.* “You’ll get your lands. Some of them, at least. Since you partly subdued the Blackwoods.”

That seemed to satisfy Lord Jonos. “We will be content with whatever portion my lord thinks fair. If I may offer you some counsel, though, it does not serve to be too gentle with these Blackwoods. Treachery runs in their blood. Before the Andals came to Westeros, House Bracken ruled this river. We were kings and the Blackwoods were our vassals, but they betrayed us and usurped the crown. Every Blackwood is born a turncloak. You would do well to remember that when you are making terms.”

“Oh, I shall,” Jaime promised.

When he rode from Bracken’s siege camp to the gates of Raventree, Peck went before him with a peace banner. Before they reached the castle, twenty pairs of eyes were watching them from the gatehouse ramparts. He drew Honor to a halt at the edge of the moat, a deep trench lined with stone, its green waters choked by scum. Jaime was about to command Ser Kennos to sound the Horn of Herrock when the drawbridge began to descend.

Lord Tytos Blackwood met him in the outer ward, mounted on a destrier as gaunt as himself. Very tall and very thin, the Lord of Raventree had a hook



nose, long hair, and a ragged salt-and-pepper beard that showed more salt than pepper. In silver inlay on the breastplate of his burnished scarlet armor was a white tree bare and dead, surrounded by a flock of onyx ravens taking flight. A cloak of raven feathers fluttered from his shoulders.

“Lord Tytos,” Jaime said. “Ser.”

“Thank you for allowing me to enter.”

“I will not say that you are welcome. Nor will I deny that I have hoped that you might come. You are here for my sword.”

“I am here to make an end of this. Your men have fought valiantly, but your war is lost. Are you prepared to yield?”

“To the king. Not to Jonos Bracken.”

“I understand.”

Blackwood hesitated a moment. “Is it your wish that I dismount and kneel before you here and now?”

A hundred eyes were looking on. “The wind is cold and the yard is muddy,” said Jaime. “You can do your kneeling on the carpet in your solar once we’ve agreed on terms.”

“That is chivalrous of you,” said Lord Tytos. “Come, ser. My hall might lack for food, but never for courtesy.”

Blackwood’s solar was on the second floor of a cavernous timber keep. There was a fire burning in the hearth when they entered. The room was large and airy, with great beams of dark oak supporting the high ceiling. Woolen tapestries covered the walls, and a pair of wide latticework doors looked out upon the godswood. Through their thick, diamond-shaped panes of yellow glass Jaime glimpsed the gnarled limbs of the tree from which the castle took its name. It was a weirwood ancient and colossal, ten times the size of the one in the Stone Garden at Casterly Rock. This tree was bare and dead, though.

“The Brackens poisoned it,” said his host. “For a thousand years it has not shown a leaf. In another thousand it will have turned to stone, the maesters say. Weirwoods never rot.”

“And the ravens?” asked Jaime. “Where are they?”

“They come at dusk and roost all night. Hundreds of them. They cover the tree like black leaves, every limb and every branch. They have been coming for thousands of years. How or why, no man can say, yet the tree draws them every night.” Blackwood settled in a high-backed chair. “For honor’s sake I must ask about my liege lord.”

“Ser Edmure is on his way to Casterly Rock as my captive. His wife will remain at the Twins until their child is born. Then she and the babe will join him. So long as he does not attempt escape or plot rebellion, Edmure will live a long life.”

“Long and bitter. A life without honor. Until his dying day, men will say he was afraid to fight.”

*Unjustly*, Jaime thought. *It was his child he feared for. He knew whose son I am, better than mine own aunt.* “The choice was his. His uncle would have made us bleed.”

“We agree on that much.” Blackwood’s voice gave nothing away. “What have you done with Ser Brynden, if I may ask?”

“I offered to let him take the black. Instead he fled.” Jaime smiled. “Do you have him here, perchance?”

“No.”

“Would you tell me if you did?”

It was Tytos Blackwood’s turn to smile.

Jaime brought his hands together, the gold fingers inside the fleshy ones. “Perhaps it is time we talked of terms.”

“Is this where I get down on my knees?”

“If it please you. Or we can say you did.”

Lord Blackwood remained seated. They soon reached agreement on the major points: confession, fealty, pardon, a certain sum of gold and silver to be paid. “What lands will you require?” Lord Tytos asked. When Jaime handed him the map, he took one look and chuckled. “To be sure. The turncloak must be given his reward.”

“Yes, but a smaller one than he imagines, for a smaller service. Which of these lands will you consent to part with?”

Lord Tytos considered for a moment. “Woodhedge, Crossbow Ridge, and Buckle.”

“A ruin, a ridge, and a few hovels? Come, my lord. You must suffer for your treason. He will want one of the mills, at least.” Mills were a valuable source of tax. The lord received a tenth of all the grain they ground.

“Lord’s Mill, then. Grindcorn is ours.”

“And another village. Cairns?”

“I have forebears buried beneath the rocks of Cairns.” He looked at the map again. “Give him Honeytree and its hives. All that sweet will make him fat and rot his teeth.”

“Done, then. But for one last thing.”

“A hostage.”

“Yes, my lord. You have a daughter, I believe.”

“Bethany.” Lord Tytos looked stricken. “I also have two brothers and a sister. A pair of widowed aunts. Nieces, nephews, cousins. I had thought you might consent ...”

“It must be a child of your blood.”

“Bethany is only eight. A gentle girl, full of laughter. She has never been more than a day’s ride from my hall.”

“Why not let her see King’s Landing? His Grace is almost of an age with her. He would be pleased to have another friend.”

“One he can hang if the friend’s father should displease him?” asked Lord Tytos. “I have four sons. Would you consider one of them instead? Ben is twelve and thirsty for adventure. He could squire for you if it please my lord.”

“I have more squires than I know what to do with. Every time I take a piss, they fight for the right to hold my cock. And you have six sons, my lord, not four.”

“Once. Robert was my youngest and never strong. He died nine days ago, of a looseness of the bowels. Lucas was murdered at the Red Wedding. Walder Frey’s fourth wife was a Blackwood, but kinship counts for no more than guest right at the Twins. I should like to bury Lucas beneath the tree, but the Freys have not yet seen fit to return his bones to me.”

“I’ll see that they do. Was Lucas your eldest son?”

“My second. Brynden is my eldest, and my heir. Next comes Hoster. A bookish boy, I fear.”

“They have books in King’s Landing too. I recall my little brother reading them from time to time. Perhaps your son would like a look at them. I will accept Hoster as our hostage.”

Blackwood’s relief was palpable. “Thank you, my lord.” He hesitated a moment. “If I may be so bold, you would do well to require a hostage from Lord Jonos too. One of his daughters. For all his rutting, he has not proved man enough to father sons.”

“He had a bastard son killed in the war.”

“Did he? Harry was a bastard, true enough, but whether Jonos sired him is a thornier question. A fair-haired boy, he was, and comely. Jonos is neither.” Lord Tytos got to his feet. “Will you do me the honor of taking supper with me?”

“Some other time, my lord.” The castle was starving; no good would be served by Jaime stealing food from their mouths. “I cannot linger. Riverrun awaits.”

“Riverrun? Or King’s Landing?”

“Both.”

Lord Tytos did not attempt to dissuade him. “Hoster can be ready to depart within the hour.”

He was. The boy met Jaime by the stables, with a bedroll slung over one shoulder and a bundle of scrolls beneath his arm. He could not have been any older than sixteen, yet he was even taller than his father, almost seven feet of legs and shins and elbows, a gangling, gawky boy with a cowlick. “Lord Commander. I’m your hostage, Hoster. Hos, they call me.” He grinned.

*Does he think this is a lark? “Pray, who are they?”*

“My friends. My brothers.”

“I am not your friend and I am not your brother.” That cleaned the grin off the boy’s face. Jaime turned to Lord Tytos. “My lord, let there be no misunderstanding here. Lord Beric Dondarrion, Thoros of Myr, Sandor Clegane, Brynden Tully, this woman Stoneheart ... all these are outlaws and rebels, enemies to the king and all his leal subjects. If I should learn that you or yours are hiding them, protecting them, or assisting them in any way, I will not hesitate to send you your son’s head. I hope you understand that. Understand this as well: I am not Ryman Frey.”

“No.” All trace of warmth had left Lord Blackwood’s mouth. “I know who I am dealing with. Kingslayer.”

“Good.” Jaime mounted and wheeled Honor toward the gate. “I wish you a good harvest and the joy of the king’s peace.”

He did not ride far. Lord Jonos Bracken was waiting for him outside Raventree, just beyond the range of a good crossbow. He was mounted on an armored destrier and had donned his plate and mail, and a grey steel greathelm with a horsehair crest. “I saw them pull the direwolf banner down,” he said when Jaime reached him. “Is it done?”

“Done and done. Go home and plant your fields.”

Lord Bracken raised his visor. “I trust I have more fields to plant than when you went into that castle.”

“Buckle, Woodhedge, Honeytree and all its hives.” He was forgetting one. “Oh, and Crossbow Ridge.”

“A mill,” said Bracken. “I must have a mill.”

“Lord’s Mill.”

Lord Jonos snorted. “Aye, that will serve. For now.” He pointed at Hoster Blackwood, riding back with Peck. “Is this what he gave you for a hostage? You were cozened, ser. A weakling, this one. Water for blood. Never mind how tall he is, any one of my girls could snap him like a rotten twig.”

“How many daughters do you have, my lord?” Jaime asked him. “Five. Two by my first wife and three by my third.” Too late, he seemed to realize that he might have said too much.

“Send one of them to court. She will have the privilege of attending the Queen Regent.”

Bracken’s face grew dark as he realized the import of those words. “Is this how you repay the friendship of Stone Hedge?”

“It is a great honor to wait upon the queen,” Jaime reminded his lordship. “You might want to impress that on her. We’ll look for the girl before the year is out.” He did not wait for Lord Bracken to reply but touched Honor

lightly with his golden spurs and trotted off. His men formed up and followed, banners streaming. Castle and camp were soon lost behind them, obscured by the dust of their hooves.

Neither outlaws nor wolves had troubled them on their way to Raven-tree, so Jaime decided to return by a different route. If the gods were good, he might stumble on the Blackfish, or lure Beric Dondarrion into an unwise attack.

They were following the Widow's Wash when they ran out of day. Jaime called his hostage forward and asked him where to find the nearest ford, and the boy led them there. As the column splashed across the shallow waters, the sun was setting behind a pair of grassy hills. "The Teats," said Hoster Blackwood.

Jaime recalled Lord Bracken's map. "There's a village between those hills."

"Pennytree," the lad confirmed. "We'll camp there for the night." If there were villagers about, they might have knowledge of Ser Brynden or the outlaws. "Lord Jonos made some remark about whose teats they were," he recalled to the Blackwood boy as they rode toward the darkening hills and the last light of the day. "The Brackens call them by one name and the Blackwoods by another."

"Aye, my lord. For a hundred years or so. Before that, they were the Mother's Teats, or just the Teats. There are two of them, and it was thought that they resembled ..."

"I can see what they resemble." Jaime found himself thinking back on the woman in the tent and the way she'd tried to hide her large, dark nipples. "What changed a hundred years ago?"

"Aegon the Unworthy took Barba Bracken as his mistress," the bookish boy replied. "She was a very buxom wench, they say, and one day when the king was visiting at the Stone Hedge he went out hunting and saw the Teats and ..."

“... named them for his mistress.” Aegon the Fourth had died long before Jaime had been born, but he recalled enough of the history of his reign to guess what must have happened next. “Only later he put the Bracken girl aside and took up with a Blackwood, was that the way of it?”

“Lady Melissa,” Hoster confirmed. “Missy, they called her. There’s a statue of her in our godswood. She was *much* more beautiful than Barba Bracken, but slender, and Barba was heard to say that Missy was flat as a boy. When King Aegon heard, he ...”

“... gave her Barba’s teats.” Jaime laughed. “How did all this begin, between Blackwood and Bracken? Is it written down?”

“It is, my lord,” the boy said, “but some of the histories were penned by their maesters and some by ours, centuries after the events that they purport to chronicle. It goes back to the Age of Heroes. The Blackwoods were kings in those days. The Brackens were petty lords, renowned for breeding horses. Rather than pay their king his just due, they used the gold their horses brought them to hire swords and cast him down.”

“When did all this happen?”

“Five hundred years before the Andals. A thousand, if the *True History* is to be believed. Only no one knows when the Andals crossed the narrow sea. The *True History* says four thousand years have passed since then, but some maesters claim that it was only two. Past a certain point, all the dates grow hazy and confused, and the clarity of history becomes the fog of legend.”

*Tyrion would like this one. They could talk from dusk to dawn, arguing about books.* For a moment his bitterness toward his brother was forgotten, until he remembered what the Imp had done. “So you are fighting over a crown that one of you took from the other back when the Casterlys still held Casterly Rock, is that the root of it? The crown of a kingdom that has not existed for thousands of years?” He chuckled. “So many years, so many wars, so many kings ... you’d think someone would have made a peace.”

“Someone did, my lord. Many someones. We’ve had a hundred peaces with the Brackens, many sealed with marriages. There’s Blackwood blood in



every Bracken, and Bracken blood in every Blackwood. The Old King's Peace lasted half a century. But then some fresh quarrel broke out, and the old wounds opened and began to bleed again. That's how it always happens, my father says. So long as men remember the wrongs done to their forebears, no peace will ever last. So we go on century after century, with us hating the Brackens and them hating us. My father says there will never be an end to it."

"There could be."

"How, my lord? The old wounds never heal, my father says."

"My father had a saying too. Never wound a foe when you can kill him. Dead men don't claim vengeance."

"Their sons do," said Hoster, apologetically. "Not if you kill the sons as well. Ask the Casterlys about that if you doubt me. Ask Lord and Lady Tarbeck, or the Reynes of Castamere. Ask the Prince of Dragonstone." For an instant, the deep red clouds that crowned the western hills reminded him of Rhaegar's children, all wrapped up in crimson cloaks.

"Is that why you killed all the Starks?"

"Not all," said Jaime. "Lord Eddard's daughters live. One has just been wed. The other ..." *Brienne, where are you? Have you found her?* "... if the gods are good, she'll forget she was a Stark. She'll wed some burly blacksmith or fat-faced innkeep, fill his house with children, and never need to fear that some knight might come along to smash their heads against a wall."

"The gods are good," his hostage said, uncertainly.

*You go on believing that.* Jaime let Honor feel his spurs.

Pennytree proved to be a much larger village than he had anticipated. The war had been here too; blackened orchards and the scorched shells of broken houses testified to that. But for every home in ruins three more had been rebuilt. Through the gathering blue dusk Jaime glimpsed fresh thatch

upon a score of roofs, and doors made of raw green wood. Between a duck pond and a blacksmith's forge, he came upon the tree that gave the place its name, an oak ancient and tall. Its gnarled roots twisted in and out of the earth like a nest of slow brown serpents, and hundreds of old copper pennies had been nailed to its huge trunk.

Peck stared at the tree, then at the empty houses. "Where are the people?"

"Hiding," Jaime told him.

Inside the homes all the fires had been put out, but some still smoked, and none of them were cold. The nanny goat that Hot Harry Merrell found rooting through a vegetable garden was the only living creature to be seen ... but the village had a holdfast as strong as any in the riverlands, with thick stone walls twelve feet high, and Jaime knew that was where he'd find the villagers. *They hid behind those walls when raiders came, that's why there's still a village here. And they are hiding there again, from me.*

He rode Honor up to the holdfast gates. "You in the holdfast. We mean you no harm. We're king's men."

Faces appeared on the wall above the gate. "They was king's men burned our village," one man called down. "Before that, some other king's men took our sheep. They were for a different king, but that didn't matter none to our sheep. King's men killed Harsley and Ser Ormond, and raped Lacey till she died."

"Not my men," Jaime said. "Will you open your gates?"

"When you're gone we will."

Ser Kennos rode close to him. "We could break that gate down easy enough, or put it to the torch."

"While they drop stones on us and feather us with arrows." Jaime shook his head. "It would be a bloody business, and for what? These people have done us no harm. We'll shelter in the houses, but I'll have no stealing. We have our own provisions."

As a half-moon crept up the sky, they staked their horses out in the village commons and supped on salted mutton, dried apples, and hard cheese. Jaime ate sparingly and shared a skin of wine with Peck and Hos the hostage. He tried to count the pennies nailed to the old oak, but there were too many of them and he kept losing count. *What's that all about?* The Blackwood boy would tell him if he asked, but that would spoil the mystery.

He posted sentries to see that no one left the confines of the village. He sent out scouts as well, to make certain no enemy took them unawares. It was near midnight when two came riding back with a woman they had taken captive. "She rode up bold as you please, m'lord, demanding words with you."

Jaime scrambled to his feet. "My lady. I had not thought to see you again so soon." *Gods be good, she looks ten years older than when I saw her last. And what's happened to her face?* "That bandage ... you've been wounded ..."

"A bite." She touched the hilt of her sword, the sword that he had given her. *Oathkeeper*. "My lord, you gave me a quest."

"The girl. Have you found her?"

"I have," said Brienne, Maid of Tarth. "Where is she?"

"A day's ride. I can take you to her, ser ... but you will need to come alone. Elsewise, the Hound will kill her."