



JAIME

His hand burned.

Still, *still*, long after they had snuffed out the torch they'd used to sear his bloody stump, days after, he could still feel the fire lancing up his arm, and his fingers twisting in the flames, the fingers he no longer had.

He had taken wounds before, but never like this. He had never known there could be such pain. Sometimes, unbidden, old prayers bubbled from his lips, prayers he learned as a child and never thought of since, prayers he had first prayed with Cersei kneeling beside him in the sept at Casterly Rock. Sometimes he even wept, until he heard the Mummer's laughing. Then he made his eyes go dry and his heart go dead, and prayed for his fever to burn away his tears. *Now I know how Tyrion has felt, all those times they laughed at him.*

After the second time he fell from the saddle, they bound him tight to Brienne of Tarth and made them share a horse again. One day, instead of back to front, they bound them face-to-face. "The lovers," Shagwell sighed loudly, "and what a lovely sight they are. 'Twould be cruel to separate the good knight and his lady." Then he laughed that high shrill laugh of his, and said, "Ah, but which one is the knight and which one is the lady?"

If I had my hand, you'd learn that soon enough, Jaime thought. His arms ached and his legs were numb from the ropes, but after a while none of that mattered. His world shrunk to the throb of agony that was his phantom

hand, and Brienne pressed against him. *She's warm, at least*, he consoled himself, though the wench's breath was as foul as his own.

His hand was always between them. Urswyck had hung it about his neck on a cord, so it dangled down against his chest, slapping Brienne's breasts as Jaime slipped in and out of consciousness. His right eye was swollen shut, the wound inflamed where Brienne had cut him during their fight, but it was his hand that hurt the most. Blood and pus seeped from his stump, and the missing hand throbbed every time the horse took a step.

His throat was so raw that he could not eat, but he drank wine when they gave it to him, and water when that was all they offered. Once they handed him a cup and he quaffed it straight away, trembling, and the Brave Companions burst into laughter so loud and harsh it hurt his ears. "That's horse piss you're drinking, Kingslayer," Rorge told him. Jaime was so thirsty he drank it anyway, but afterward he retched it all back up. They made Brienne wash the vomit out of his beard, just as they made her clean him up when he soiled himself in the saddle.

One damp cold morning when he was feeling slightly stronger, a madness took hold of him and he reached for the Dornishman's sword with his left hand and wrenched it clumsily from its scabbard. *Let them kill me, he thought, so long as I die fighting, a blade in hand.* But it was no good. Shagwell came hopping from leg to leg, dancing nimbly aside when Jaime slashed at him. Unbalanced, he staggered forward, hacking wildly at the fool, but Shagwell spun and ducked and darted until all the Mummers were laughing at Jaime's futile efforts to land a blow. When he tripped over a rock and stumbled to his knees, the fool leapt in and planted a wet kiss atop his head.

Rorge finally flung him aside and kicked the sword from Jaime's feeble fingers as he tried to bring it up. "That wath amuthing, Kingthlayer," said Vargo Hoat, "but if you try it again, I thall take your other hand, or perhaph a foot."

Jaime lay on his back afterward, staring at the night sky, trying not to feel the pain that snaked up his right arm every time he moved it. The night was strangely beautiful. The moon was a graceful crescent, and it seemed as though he had never seen so many stars. The King's Crown was at the

zenith, and he could see the Stallion rearing, and there the Swan. The Moonmaid, shy as ever, was half-hidden behind a pine tree. *How can such a night be beautiful?* he asked himself. *Why would the stars want to look down on such as me?*

“Jaime,” Brienne whispered, so faintly he thought he was dreaming it. “Jaime, what are you doing?”

“Dying,” he whispered back.

“No,” she said, “no, you must live.”

He wanted to laugh. “Stop telling me what to do, wench. I’ll die if it pleases me.”

“Are you so craven?”

The word shocked him. He was Jaime Lannister, a knight of the Kingsguard, he was the Kingslayer. No man had ever called him craven. Other things they called him, yes; oathbreaker, liar, murderer. They said he was cruel, treacherous, reckless. But never craven. “What else can I do, but die?”

“Live,” she said, “live, and fight, and take revenge.” But she spoke too loudly. Rorge heard her voice, if not her words, and came over to kick her, shouting at her to hold her bloody tongue if she wanted to keep it.

Craven, Jaime thought, as Brienne fought to stifle her moans. *Can it be? They took my sword hand. Was that all I was, a sword hand? Gods be good, is it true?*

The wench had the right of it. He could not die. Cersei was waiting for him. She would have need of him. And Tyrion, his little brother, who loved him for a lie. And his enemies were waiting too; the Young Wolf who had beaten him in the Whispering Wood and killed his men around him, Edmure Tully who had kept him in darkness and chains, these Brave Companions.

When morning came, he made himself eat. They fed him a mush of oats, horse food, but he forced down every spoon. He ate again at evenfall, and the next day. *Live*, he told himself harshly, when the mush was like to gag him, *live for Cersei, live for Tyrion. Live for vengeance. A Lannister always pays his debts.* His missing hand throbbed and burned and stank. *When I*

reach King's Landing I'll have a new hand forged, a golden hand, and one day I'll use it to rip out Vargo Hoat's throat.

The days and the nights blurred together in a haze of pain. He would sleep in the saddle, pressed against Brienne, his nose full of the stink of his rotting hand, and then at night he would lie awake on the hard ground, caught in a waking nightmare. Weak as he was, they always bound him to a tree. It gave him some cold consolation to know that they feared him that much, even now.

Brienne was always bound beside him. She lay there in her bonds like a big dead cow, saying not a word. *The wench has built a fortress inside herself. They will rape her soon enough, but behind her walls they cannot touch her.* But Jaime's walls were gone. They had taken his hand, they had taken his *sword hand*, and without it he was nothing. The other was no good to him. Since the time he could walk, his left arm had been his shield arm, no more. It was his right hand that made him a knight; his right arm that made him a man.

One day, he heard Urswyck say something about Harrenhal, and remembered that was to be their destination. That made him laugh aloud, and *that* made Timeon slash his face with a long thin whip. The cut bled, but beside his hand he scarcely felt it. "Why did you laugh?" the wench asked him that night, in a whisper.

"Harrenhal was where they gave me the white cloak," he whispered back. "Whent's great tourney. He wanted to show us all his big castle and his fine sons. I wanted to show them too. I was only fifteen, but no one could have beaten me that day. Aerys never let me joust." He laughed again. "He sent me away. But now I'm coming back."

They heard the laugh. That night it was Jaime who got the kicks and punches. He hardly felt them either, until Rorge slammed a boot into his stump, and then he fainted.

It was the next night when they finally came, three of the worst; Shagwell, noseless Rorge, and the fat Dothraki Zollo, the one who'd cut his hand off. Zollo and Rorge were arguing about who would go first as they approached; there seemed to be no question but that the fool would be going last. Shagwell suggested that they should both go first, and take her

front and rear. Zollo and Rorge liked that notion, only then they began to fight about who would get the front and who the rear.

They will leave her a cripple too, but inside, where it does not show. “Wench,” he whispered as Zollo and Rorge were cursing one another, “let them have the meat, and you go far away. It will be over quicker, and they’ll get less pleasure from it.”

“They’ll get no pleasure from what I’ll give them,” she whispered back, defiant.

Stupid stubborn brave bitch. She was going to get herself good and killed, he knew it. *And what do I care if she does? If she hadn’t been so pigheaded, I’d still have a hand.* Yet he heard himself whisper, “Let them do it, and go away inside.” That was what he’d done, when the Starks had died before him, Lord Rickard cooking in his armor while his son Brandon strangled himself trying to save him. “Think of Renly, if you loved him. Think of Tarth, mountains and seas, pools, waterfalls, whatever you have on your Sapphire Isle, think . . .”

But Rorge had won the argument by then. “You’re the ugliest woman I ever seen,” he told Brienne, “but don’t think I can’t make you uglier. You want a nose like mine? Fight me, and you’ll get one. And two eyes, that’s too many. One scream out o’ you, and I’ll pop one out and make you eat it, and then I’ll pull your fucking teeth out one by one.”

“Oh, do it, Rorge,” pleaded Shagwell. “Without her teeth, she’ll look just like my dear old mother.” He cackled. “And I *always* wanted to fuck my dear old mother up the arse.”

Jaime chuckled. “There’s a funny fool. I have a riddle for you, Shagwell. Why do you care if she screams? Oh, wait, I know.” He shouted, “*SAPPHIRES*,” as loudly as he could.

Cursing, Rorge kicked at his stump again. Jaime howled. *I never knew there was such agony in the world*, was the last thing he remembered thinking. It was hard to say how long he was gone, but when the pain spit him out, Urswyck was there, and Vargo Hoat himself. “Thee’th not to be touched,” the goat screamed, spraying spittle all over Zollo. “Thee hath to be a maid, you foolth! Thee’th worth a bag of thapphireth!” And from then on, every night Hoat put guards on them, to protect them from his own.

Two nights passed in silence before the wench finally found the courage to whisper, “Jaime? Why did you shout out?”

“Why did I shout ‘*sapphires*,’ you mean? Use your wits, wench. Would this lot have cared if I shouted ‘*rape*’?”

“You did not need to shout at all.”

“You’re hard enough to look at *with* a nose. Besides, I wanted to make the goat say ‘*thapphireth*.’” He chuckled. “A good thing for you I’m such a liar. An honorable man would have told the truth about the Sapphire Isle.”

“All the same,” she said. “I thank you, ser.”

His hand was throbbing again. He ground his teeth and said, “A Lannister pays his debts. That was for the river, and those rocks you dropped on Robin Ryger.”

The goat wanted to make a show of parading him in, so Jaime was made to dismount a mile from the gates of Harrenhal. A rope was looped around his waist, a second around Brienne’s wrists; the ends were tied to the pommel of Vargo Hoat’s saddle. They stumbled along side by side behind the Qohorik’s striped zorse.

Jaime’s rage kept him walking. The linen that covered the stump was grey and stinking with pus. His phantom fingers screamed with every step. *I am stronger than they know*, he told himself. *I am still a Lannister. I am still a knight of the Kingsguard*. He would reach Harrenhal, and then King’s Landing. He would live. *And I will pay this debt with interest*.

As they approached the clifflike walls of Black Harren’s monstrous castle, Brienne squeezed his arm. “Lord Bolton holds this castle. The Boltons are bannermen to the Starks.”

“The Boltons skin their enemies.” Jaime remembered that much about the northman. Tyrion would have known all there was to know about the Lord of the Dreadfort, but Tyrion was a thousand leagues away, with Cersei. *I cannot die while Cersei lives*, he told himself. *We will die together as we were born together*.

The castleton outside the walls had been burned to ash and blackened stone, and many men and horses had recently encamped beside the lakeshore, where Lord Whent had staged his great tourney in the year of the

false spring. A bitter smile touched Jaime's lips as they crossed that torn ground. Someone had dug a privy trench in the very spot where he'd once knelt before the king to say his vows. *I never dreamed how quick the sweet would turn to sour. Aerys would not even let me savor that one night. He honored me, and then he spat on me.*

"The banners," Brienne observed. "Flayed man and twin towers, see. King Robb's sworn men. There, above the gatehouse, grey on white. They fly the direwolf."

Jaime twisted his head upward for a look. "That's your bloody wolf, true enough," he granted her. "And those are heads to either side of it."

Soldiers, servants, and camp followers gathered to hoot at them. A spotted bitch followed them through the camps barking and growling until one of the Lyseni impaled her on a lance and galloped to the front of the column. "I am bearing Kingslayer's banner," he shouted, shaking the dead dog above Jaime's head.

The walls of Harrenhal were so thick that passing beneath them was like passing through a stone tunnel. Vargo Hoat had sent two of his Dothraki ahead to inform Lord Bolton of their coming, so the outer ward was full of the curious. They gave way as Jaime staggered past, the rope around his waist jerking and pulling at him whenever he slowed. "I give you the *Kingthlayer*," Vargo Hoat proclaimed in that thick slobbery voice of his. A spear jabbed at the small of Jaime's back, sending him sprawling.

Instinct made him put out his hands to stop his fall. When his stump smashed against the ground the pain was blinding, yet somehow he managed to fight his way back to one knee. Before him, a flight of broad stone steps led up to the entrance of one of Harrenhal's colossal round towers. Five knights and a northman stood looking down on him; the one pale-eyed in wool and fur, the five fierce in mail and plate, with the twin towers sigil on their surcoats. "A fury of Freys," Jaime declared. "Ser Danwell, Ser Aenys, Ser Hosteen." He knew Lord Walder's sons by sight; his aunt had married one, after all. "You have my condolences."

"For what, ser?" Ser Danwell Frey asked.

"Your brother's son, Ser Cleos," said Jaime. "He was with us until outlaws filled him full of arrows. Urswyck and this lot took his goods and

left him for the wolves.”

“*My lords!*” Brienne wrenched herself free and pushed forward. “I saw your banners. Hear me for your oath!”

“Who speaks?” demanded Ser Aenys Frey.

“Lannither’th wet nurth.”

“I am Brienne of Tarth, daughter to Lord Selwyn the Evenstar, and sworn to House Stark even as you are.”

Ser Aenys spit at her feet. “That’s for your oaths. We trusted the word of Robb Stark, and he repaid our faith with betrayal.”

Now this is interesting. Jaime twisted to see how Brienne might take the accusation, but the wench was as singleminded as a mule with a bit between his teeth. “I know of no betrayal.” She chafed at the ropes around her wrists. “Lady Catelyn commanded me to deliver Lannister to his brother at King’s Landing—”

“She was trying to drown him when we found them,” said Urswyck the Faithful.

She reddened. “In anger I forgot myself, but I would never have killed him. If he dies the Lannisters will put my lady’s daughters to the sword.”

Ser Aenys was unmoved. “Why should that trouble us?”

“Ransom him back to Riverrun,” urged Ser Danwell.

“Casterly Rock has more gold,” one brother objected.

“Kill him!” said another. “His head for Ned Stark’s!”

Shagwell the Fool somersaulted to the foot of the steps in his grey and pink motley and began to sing. “*There once was a lion who danced with a bear, oh my, oh my . . .*”

“Thilenth, fool.” Vargo Hoat cuffed the man. “The Kingthlayer ith not for the bear. He ith mine.”

“He is no one’s should he die.” Roose Bolton spoke so softly that men quieted to hear him. “And pray recall, my lord, you are not master of Harrenhal till I march north.”

Fever made Jaime as fearless as he was lightheaded. “Can this be the Lord of the Dreadfort? When last I heard, my father had sent you

scampering off with your tail betwixt your legs. When did you stop running, my lord?"

Bolton's silence was a hundred times more threatening than Vargo Hoat's slobbering malevolence. Pale as morning mist, his eyes concealed more than they told. Jaime disliked those eyes. They reminded him of the day at King's Landing when Ned Stark had found him seated on the Iron Throne. The Lord of the Dreadfort finally pursed his lips and said, "You have lost a hand."

"No," said Jaime, "I have it here, hanging round my neck."

Roose Bolton reached down, snapped the cord, and flung the hand at Hoat. "Take this away. The sight of it offends me."

"I will thend it to hith lord father. I will tell him he muth pay one hundred thouthand dragonth, or we thall return the Kingthlayer to him pieth by pieth. And when we hath hith gold, we thall deliver Ther Jaime to Karthark, and collect a maiden too!" A roar of laughter went up from the Brave Companions.

"A fine plan," said Roose Bolton, the same way he might say, "A fine wine," to a dinner companion, "though Lord Karstark will not be giving you his daughter. King Robb has shortened him by a head, for treason and murder. As to Lord Tywin, he remains at King's Landing, and there he will stay till the new year, when his grandson takes for bride a daughter of Highgarden."

"Winterfell," said Brienne. "You mean Winterfell. King Joffrey is betrothed to Sansa Stark."

"No longer. The Battle of the Blackwater changed all. The rose and the lion joined there, to shatter Stannis Baratheon's host and burn his fleet to ashes."

I warned you, Urswyck, Jaime thought, and you, goat. When you bet against the lions, you lose more than your purse. "Is there word of my sister?" he asked.

"She is well. As is your . . . nephew." Bolton paused before he said *nephew*, a pause that said *I know*. "Your brother also lives, though he took a wound in the battle." He beckoned to a dour northman in a studded

brigantine. “Escort Ser Jaime to Qyburn. And unbind this woman’s hands.” As the rope between Brienne’s wrists was slashed in two, he said, “Pray forgive us, my lady. In such troubled times it is hard to know friend from foe.”

Brienne rubbed inside her wrist where the hemp had scraped her skin bloody. “My lord, these men tried to rape me.”

“Did they?” Lord Bolton turned his pale eyes on Vargo Hoat. “I am displeased. By that, and this of Ser Jaime’s hand.”

There were five northmen and as many Freys in the yard for every Brave Companion. The goat might not be as clever as some, but he could count that high at least. He held his tongue.

“They took my sword,” Brienne said, “my armor . . .”

“You shall have no need of armor here, my lady,” Lord Bolton told her. “In Harrenhal, you are under my protection. Amabel, find suitable rooms for the Lady Brienne. Walton, you will see to Ser Jaime at once.” He did not wait for an answer, but turned and climbed the steps, his fur-trimmed cloak swirling behind. Jaime had only enough time to exchange a quick look with Brienne before they were marched away, separately.

In the maester’s chambers beneath the rookery, a grey-haired, fatherly man named Qyburn sucked in his breath when he cut away the linen from the stump of Jaime’s hand.

“That bad? Will I die?”

Qyburn pushed at the wound with a finger, and wrinkled his nose at the gush of pus. “No. Though in a few more days . . .” He sliced away Jaime’s sleeve. “The corruption has spread. See how tender the flesh is? I must cut it all away. The safest course would be to take the arm off.”

“Then *you*’ll die,” Jaime promised. “Clean the stump and sew it up. I’ll take my chances.”

Qyburn frowned. “I can leave you the upper arm, make the cut at your elbow, but . . .”

“Take any part of my arm, and you’d best chop off the other one as well, or I’ll strangle you with it afterward.”

Qyburn looked in his eyes. Whatever he saw there gave him pause. “Very well. I will cut away the rotten flesh, no more. Try to burn out the corruption with boiling wine and a poultice of nettle, mustard seed, and bread mold. Mayhaps that will suffice. It is on your head. You will want milk of the poppy—”

“No.” Jaime dare not let himself be put to sleep; he might be short an arm when he woke, no matter what the man said.

Qyburn was taken aback. “There will be pain.”

“I’ll scream.”

“A great deal of pain.”

“I’ll scream very loudly.”

“Will you take some wine at least?”

“Does the High Septon ever pray?”

“Of that I am not certain. I shall bring the wine. Lie back, I must needs strap down your arm.”

With a bowl and a sharp blade, Qyburn cleaned the stump while Jaime gulped down strongwine, spilling it all over himself in the process. His left hand did not seem to know how to find his mouth, but there was something to be said for that. The smell of wine in his sodden beard helped disguise the stench of pus.

Nothing helped when the time came to pare away the rotten flesh. Jaime did scream then, and pounded his table with his good fist, over and over and over again. He screamed again when Qyburn poured boiling wine over what remained of his stump. Despite all his vows and all his fears, he lost consciousness for a time. When he woke, the maester was sewing at his arm with needle and catgut. “I left a flap of skin to fold back over your wrist.”

“You have done this before,” muttered Jaime, weakly. He could taste blood in his mouth where he’d bitten his tongue.

“No man who serves with Vargo Hoat is a stranger to stumps. He makes them wherever he goes.”

Qyburn did not look a monster, Jaime thought. He was spare and soft-spoken, with warm brown eyes. “How does a maester come to ride with the

Brave Companions?”

“The Citadel took my chain.” Qyburn put away his needle. “I should do something about that wound above your eye as well. The flesh is badly inflamed.”

Jaime closed his eyes and let the wine and Qyburn do their work. “Tell me of the battle.” As keeper of Harrenhal’s ravens, Qyburn would have been the first to hear the news.

“Lord Stannis was caught between your father and the fire. It’s said the Imp set the river itself aflame.”

Jaime saw green flames reaching up into the sky higher than the tallest towers, as burning men screamed in the streets. *I have dreamed this dream before*. It was almost funny, but there was no one to share the joke.

“Open your eye.” Qyburn soaked a cloth in warm water and dabbed at the crust of dried blood. The eyelid was swollen, but Jaime found he could force it open halfway. Qyburn’s face loomed above. “How did you come by this one?” the maester asked.

“A wench’s gift.”

“Rough wooing, my lord?”

“This wench is bigger than me and uglier than you. You’d best see to her as well. She’s still limping on the leg I pricked when we fought.”

“I will ask after her. What is this woman to you?”

“My protector.” Jaime had to laugh, no matter how it hurt.

“I’ll grind some herbs you can mix with wine to bring down your fever. Come back on the morrow and I’ll put a leech on your eye to drain the bad blood.”

“A leech. Lovely.”

“Lord Bolton is very fond of leeches,” Qyburn said primly.

“Yes,” said Jaime. “He would be.”