The Dark, Dread Toyshop

by Miss_M

Summary

The summer she turns sixteen, Brienne suffers a grave loss. She and her siblings are forced to move in with their Uncle Tywin and his sons, who own a fabulous and eerie toyshop. Sexual awakenings occur, dark family secrets are revealed, and puppet theatre echoes real life.

Notes

Fusion between A Song of Ice and Fire and The Magic Toyshop by Angela Carter (the 1967 novel as well as the 1987 film based on it, also written by Ms. Carter, which alters and expands some aspects of the novel; I consider both as equally canonical). You do not need to have read/watched Toyshop to read and, I hope, enjoy this fic. Lines will be pilfered from both canons and tweaked with impunity, the build will be slow, characters and atmosphere will loom as large as the plot, this will be a big one, folks! I own nothing but a love of both canons and a fixation on fusions.
Flesh and Blood

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The summer she turned sixteen, Brienne Tarth discovered she was made of flesh and blood.

Not that she had thought she was made of sourdough or sugar and spice and everything nice before. She ran, climbed stiles and jumped over ditches better than any boy. She took swordfighting lessons, partly out of a young girl’s nostalgia for a bygone age, partly as exercise, and partly to get away from Mrs. Roelle and her ideas about proper activities for a young lady (sewing, painting). Brienne knew how muscles felt when they burned from too much exertion, the sweet heaviness of exhaustion. The sun on her skin, the sea wind in her hair.

What she had not known was how her own flesh could feel so strange. She had been only vaguely aware of the possibility of change. Girls in school had been talking about it since Brienne turned thirteen, but she never thought the same rules applied to her. She had been tallest in her class since she was ten, and where other girls started to talk about bras and lipstick and boys, Brienne remained resolutely flat, tangle-haired and untouchable even after her monthlies began, much to her silent embarrassment. Other girls claimed boys were stupid but couldn’t seem to shut up about them. Brienne hardly thought about boys at all except as opponents in sports or creatures she might have to punch if they got too pushy and loud with rude comments about her looks.

She stood naked in front of the mirror on her sister’s wardrobe one August day some weeks after her sixteenth nameday, and examined herself. Brienne did not have a mirror on her wardrobe, but Sansa did, though she was not yet six years old. Brienne had never needed one before. She had known she was ‘not pretty’ since she was a little girl, but ‘not pretty’ took on a whole new meaning now. Her broad shoulders, small breasts and long limbs were all to the good when she fought with a blunt sword or played netball or ran track, but no matter how she squinted and turned Brienne could not imagine herself as… what? Not merely pretty. Appealing. Desirable.

Her sister’s room was stifling, yet Brienne got goose pimples at the thought of another’s hands running over her arms, her pale, freckly thighs, up to…

She crossed her arms, crossed her legs until she looked like a little girl needing to pee, and scowled at her naked self in the mirror. Her hair was thin and tangled and straw-blond, the hair between her legs was thick and tangled and a darker shade of blond. Her skin was more ruddy than tanned, and littered with freckles after the long, hot summer. The muscles in her shoulders and calves were better defined than those on most boys she knew, let alone girls. Her nose was broad, her teeth were large, her eyes were blue. She was not-pretty.

Her father kept art books illustrated with rich, mouthwatering reproductions on a shelf in the sitting room. Brienne spent hours poring over the women in the pictures, women as seen by talented men. They were nude, not naked. They were sheathed in their painted flesh as in armor. Brienne could no more imagine them scowling at their mirrors than she could imagine herself among them, lithe and graceful in just a ballet tutu, posing on a daybed with flowers in her hair like a chocolate cake, spilling with voluptuousness as she rose from a bath, pouty and mysterious in a landscape out of legend, sitting spread-legged and unashamed in some Lyseni bordello.

It never occurred to Brienne that the pretty girls who called out their wishes for a good summer to her when school ended in June without really meaning a word might scowl at their mirrors too. Might cup their breasts hesitantly, watching for a reaction from their bodies, then cross their legs awkwardly
and rub their arms to make the gooseflesh go away. Those girls would be nude and invincible. Brienne was merely naked and even more aware of her ugliness than usual.

She pulled on her T-shirt and shorts, and stomped back to her own room, sat on the bed and hugged Bear. He was originally called Eddard Bear when her father gave him to her for her fourth nameday, but the Eddard part fell off soon after, and only Bear remained. Bear had mismatched eyes because when he lost one years earlier, Brienne’s mother sewed on a plain black button as a replacement. His fur was threadbare, and he always looked pregnant with the bulging zippered pocket in front where Brienne kept her pajamas.

Hugging him used to always make her feel better in the past. She felt vaguely silly hugging him now. She was no longer a child, but she did not know what she was.

Not an adult, certainly. Her father was an adult. Mrs. Roelle was an adult, and Brienne knew she was not like them. Whatever she was, she was not like them.

Mrs. Roelle was the housekeeper, and had served as a semi-official nanny since Brienne was a child. She came to live with them not long after Brienne’s mother died, when Sansa was a baby and Pod had not yet started school. She was ugly not like Brienne was ugly, but in the way of old people who let themselves go. Brienne privately suspected that Mrs. Roelle had never been married, that she added the ‘Mrs.’ at some point on the road of advancing years to make herself sound more important. Like she was once desired, desirable.

Brienne vowed never to do that, never to call herself Mrs. Tarth, no matter that she strongly suspected she would live and die a maid. She could not imagine anyone in the whole world who would want to touch her as she sometimes touched herself, as if daring herself to do it, hands stroking her breasts to make her nipples stand to attention, thighs squeezing to enhance the curiously tingling sensation between them, while Bear regarded her with beady judgment from the end of her bed. Still, she prided herself on having more dignity than Mrs. Roelle.

Brienne and Pod and Sansa were spending the end of the summer alone with Mrs. Roelle while their father was on a lecture tour of the Free Cities. For all that their family had once owned the island on which they lived, the Tarths were no longer wealthy, their noble title a mere frippery. Selwyn Tarth preferred to be called Colonel Tarth, a title he had earned over long years in the army. He often traveled, giving lectures on the great battles in the history of Westeros to sept groups and youth groups and anyone who would pay him.

“No shame in a man earning a living, he often told Brienne, nor a woman either.”

Brienne nodded whenever he said this, waiting for the inevitable hair-ruffle which followed. Of his three children, she resembled her father the most. Sansa took after their mother with her reddish-gold hair and her delicate features, while Pod was an odd mixture of the two, gangly yet not as tall as he could have been, with the Tarth eyes and general cast of features, softened by baby fat, more fitting to a boy than to a girl like Brienne.

“I wish Papa had taken us with him,” she said over lunch to no one in particular. “I would love to see Pentos and Myr and Lys.” Maybe in those strange cities barely glimpsed through the postcards their father sent she could escape herself, her horsey face, her irritatingly ever-present flesh.

“Wouldn’t that be fun, Pod?” she prodded her little brother, desperate for someone to agree with her. Without her father there, Brienne often felt like her younger siblings presented a unified front with Mrs. Roelle. “We should ask Papa to take us next year.”

Pod didn’t even look up from his plate of bread pudding. “Not if he flies again next year. Airships are almost as bad as steel ships.”
Pod was eleven years old, and boat-mad. He made endless models from kits he ordered through the mail, intricate replicas of great sailships of the past. They had names like *The Black Dragon*, *Sweet Cersei* and *The Inimitable*, and once he finished each one, Pod placed them on the nearest available flat surface and moved on to the next one. He liked to see his boats and ships strewn about the house, a miniature armada in dry dock on shelves and mantelpieces and side tables. His boats gave him a better sense of space opening out around him than the blue horizon all around their island. Brienne regretted that the age of sailships was long past: had it not been, Pod would have been old enough to apprentice as a cabin boy. Maybe then he would learn to speak to people’s faces rather than watching his plate or his shoes as though he expected the floor to roll under him on a sudden wave.

“We’ve talked about this, Brienne,” Mrs. Roelle said, spooning more bread pudding onto her plate, even though she’d already said she didn’t want any extra. “Your father is far too busy with his lecture tour to look after you as well.”

“Lecher tour!” Sansa crowed.

Sometimes it seemed to Brienne the gods had divided the roles very carefully among the Tarth children. She was the strong, active one, the protector of her younger siblings. Pod was the quiet, absent-minded one. Sansa was the little princess. At five years of age, she was the sort of child who prompted strangers to stop Mrs. Roelle on the village high street so they could fawn over Sansa’s beauty. Mrs. Roelle always waited the longest time possible before she politely disabused them of the idea that Sansa was her own child. Brienne didn’t know whom she hated more at those times: Mrs. Roelle or the strolling strangers who looked at Sansa, then looked at Brienne, and visibly restrained themselves from asking how the two could possibly be related.

Sometimes Brienne wondered why she didn’t resent Sansa. Her baby sister’s birth had killed their mother, after all, a loss which still caused Brienne to cry herself to sleep sometimes. But Sansa was so sweet and so unaware of the very possibility that someone might not be instantly charmed by her that Brienne could not find anything but pure love for the girl in her heart. Sansa didn’t care if Brienne was big and ugly. She cared that Brienne carried her around on her shoulders so she could touch the ceiling if she stretched out her little arm. She cared that Brienne pulled faces to make her laugh. She was not very smart, but she was kind, and Brienne knew how rare that could be. She only wished Sansa would cling to her the way she clung to Mrs. Roelle, who wasn’t even family. But it was not Sansa’s fault if she was too young to understand this.

Brienne cleared away the plates before Mrs. Roelle could tell her to do so, pulling a face behind the housekeeper’s back to make Sansa laugh. Pod had already wandered off to his latest model ship. His spoon was sticky with the glue that was forever on his hands.

Brienne washed dishes while Mrs. Roelle took out her knitting, and Sansa played with Mrs. Roelle’s cat. Or rather Sansa played while the cat, a fat marmalade tom called Red Ronnet, who was the size and shape of a round, furry coffee table when seated, regarded her through slit yellow eyes. Brienne tried to keep an eye on them as well as do the dishes. She did not trust Red Ronnet any more than she trusted his proprietor.

“What is that you’re knitting, Mrs. Roelle?” she asked, out of politeness rather than genuine interest.

“A cardigan, dear.” Brienne hated being called ‘dear,’ which Mrs. Roelle knew and chose to ignore.

Sansa abandoned Red Ronnet and tried to climb up onto Mrs. Roelle’s lap. “For me?” she asked.

Mrs. Roelle laughed and petted Sansa’s hair, managing to gently push the girl off her lap and back onto the floor with the same gesture. “No, Sansa dear, it’s black, see? If this were for you, it would be pink with blue flowers. No, this is for me, my little grumpkin.”
“Why do you knit so many black clothes?” Brienne asked. She didn’t actually care, but asking questions was a way of preventing Mrs. Roelle from telling her she ought to spend less time outdoors, that the sun brought out her freckles, that she might sit and improve her sewing or read a good book like a proper young lady, didn’t she have a reading list to work through, and school less than a month away.

“At my age, there’s always someone for whom to wear black. If not right away, then sooner rather than later,” Mrs. Roelle replied with entirely too much relish. “You probably cannot even imagine that, at your age, but the Stranger comes for us all, Brienne.”

*I can imagine it*, Brienne thought, scrubbing a pot. *The Stranger took my mother and brought us you in her stead.* She sometimes wondered if Mrs. Roelle and her father were something more than housekeeper and employer. The thought made her so uncomfortable she squirmed where she stood at the sink.

“You’ll catch your death, dear, standing barefoot on the stone floor,” Mrs. Roelle said.

Brienne scratched her left calf with her right foot. Her calf muscles often cramped at night, waking her. Growing pains. She wished Mrs. Roelle were more like them, intensely unpleasant for a brief time, but then passing as though she had never existed.

Brienne wondered how old the woman was. Mrs. Roelle believed that a lady should never admit her true age. She seemed to Brienne very old and not much of a lady, but really, she must be close to Brienne’s father’s age. Brienne pushed that thought away as well, tried to conjure up her mother’s face as she scrubbed and rinsed.

Her mother had been small and graceful, everything Brienne was not. Even her hair was more gold than straw. Selwyn Tarth had met her doing a tour of administrative duty in the capital, where she was from, and brought her to live with him on this island. Her name had been Anyta Lannister, and lately Brienne had difficulty remembering her face. It was as though she could see her mother through a mosquito curtain or a thick veil of steam, but if she concentrated her mother dissolved into smudges of bright color, like a goal in a dream which receded the harder Brienne tried to reach it.

Done with the washing and drying, she asked Sansa if she wanted to go out and play. No, Sansa wanted Mrs. Roelle to tell her a story. Brienne might have stayed, were Mrs. Roelle’s stories ever about anything but beautiful, virtuous maidens who won a fair prince’s love after unimaginable hardships. As it was, she left Sansa with Mrs. Roelle and the sleeping Red Ronnet, and went up to her room to put on her running shoes.

The day was intensely hot. The only creatures which moved in the landscape were crickets, the fish in the sea, and Brienne. She had no specific goal in mind except getting away from the house and from Mrs. Roelle. As she walked briskly through knee-high, sun-parched grass and climbed a stile which would lead her to a lane which led down to the sea, Brienne remembered a conversation she had overheard in the girls’ washroom in school some months earlier.

One girl had informed another that a magazine claimed women reached their peak physically at fifteen, and sexually at thirty-five. Brienne had hidden in her cubicle and rolled her eyes while the girls alternately primped over their reflections in the mirror – they were both the sort of girl one could easily picture in a tutu or spread-legged for some tortured painter genius – and squealed in mock horror at the very idea of sex or living as long as thirty-five.

So far as Brienne was concerned, they could keep their physical and sexual peaks. She was perfectly content to be able to climb over stiles and walk quickly over grass and shingle, and never consider flesh or legs or anything of that sort. Even if she could still feel the ghost of gooseflesh prickling on
her sun-warmed arms at the memory of her hands cupping her breasts, her thighs rubbing together in her darkened bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

Since the seasons in Westeros are what they are and we have yet to hear if ‘moons’ have names and how long they are and how many there are to a year, for reasons of sanity in this fic the calendar and seasons are our own. Some more setup needs to happen on Tarth, but we’ll be getting to where we’re going soon enough.
Alone with the Night

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One night toward the end of summer, Brienne could not sleep. The orange harvest moon winked at her through the branches of the apple tree in front of her window, and not a breath of breeze reached her from the sea just over the brow of the hill. She tossed and turned, but could not seem to settle. She was exhausted with the futile effort to fall asleep. Her skin prickled and itched, her pajamas were damp under the arms. Finally she gave up on sleep and got up.

The knowledge that she was the only one awake in the house gave her a feeling of excitement, like she was getting away with something. Like anything might happen. She crept down the upstairs hallway, past Sansa and Pod’s doors, made sure she avoided the creaky plank right above Mrs. Roelle’s downstairs bedroom, and tried the door on her father’s bedroom as though she expected to find it locked. It wasn’t.

Her father’s room looked different in the moonlit darkness, everyday objects rendered strange, sepulchral. The marriage bed he had once shared with Brienne’s mother was made up with military precision, with two perfectly smooth pillows although only one was ever slept on. The cover was a plain blanket. When Brienne’s mother was alive, it used to be a crocheted white bedspread with sprigs of flowers worked in pale yellow thread, pleasantly rough under Brienne’s childish fingers. Brienne watched the bed as though she could conjure up her parents asleep in it. She tried to imagine them making love, but her mind could not, would not come up with an image of their nakedness. Even imagining them embracing dressed in pajamas and a nightdress left her feeling squirmy, like she was really doing something she shouldn’t, not simply standing in an empty, silent bedroom in a house full of sleepers. She knew this was just something she told herself, of course, just an excuse. She was trespassing.

Unbidden, an image of her father and Mrs. Roelle filled the bed, their naked arms pale like the flesh of drowned men in the moonlight, her father’s back immense as a mountain, Mrs. Roelle’s sighs of pleasure like a pig grunting.

Brienne turned her back on the bed and explored the rest of the room.

Her father’s old army footlocker stood at the foot of the bed, but the dressing table her mother had used was long gone. The only thing which testified that a woman had ever slept in this room was the wedding photograph on the mantelpiece, next to the plain clock (stopped and not rewound since the day of Selwyn Tarth’s departure for Braavos) and the trophy Brienne’s father once won at a regional swordfighting championship. Brienne was supposed to compete in the same championship in October, in Bitterbridge. It would be the furthest away from home she had ever been. Her father did not believe in taking children on long trips, he preferred them to stay at home and enjoy their childhood. To stay children.

She examined the photograph by the light of the full moon, almost as good as daylight, but ghostlier. Her mother (not her mother yet, then) wore an enormous wedding dress, all white satin and acres of fine tulle, like a theatrical costume. Like something a queen from the Age of Heroes might have worn to her own wedding. The dress took up most of the picture, nearly obscuring the two men who flanked Anyta Lannister on her wedding day.

One was Brienne’s father, dressed in his colonel’s parade uniform, his smile shy, a big man trying to
make himself look smaller by hunching slightly so as not to loom over his dainty bride in her huge
dress.

The other man was Brienne’s Uncle Tywin, her mother’s only relative. Her parents’ had been a
marriage of orphans, most of their wedding guests Selwyn’s regimental friends and a handful of her
mother’s friends from the city. And Anyta’s older brother, come to give her away.

He wore a black, old-fashioned suit with narrow trouser legs and a long coat, and a top hat. With his
tall, slim physique and fierce sideburns, the clothes made him look like the head waiter at a
particularly solemn restaurant, though his expression was better suited to an undertaker at the funeral
of someone whose family had not yet settled their bill for the casket and flowers. Everything about
Tywin Lannister suggested he liked neither his sister’s new husband, nor their wedding ceremony,
nor possibly her, Anyta. He had a wife and a son, Brienne knew, but they were not in the
photograph. Perhaps he had not thought the occasion merited his bringing them along.

Brienne wondered at his decision to attend at all, if he couldn’t even pretend to be happy for his sister
making a good marriage which was also a love match. The Lannisters had once been a proud family,
Brienne had heard the story many times, almost royalty. Her mother never put stock by that, she did
give herself airs. Tywin apparently did, and did not think a mere colonel in the army and the
former lord of Tarth Island a sufficiently exalted match for a Lannister. Never mind that he, Tywin,
was no better than a toymaker somewhere in King’s Landing, that distant capital city which seemed
to Brienne as unreal as the cities of Old Valyria she had read about in her history textbook.

A toymaker. Tywin had only ever made one toy for Brienne: a jack-in-the-box, sent to her as a
nameday present when she turned two or three. When she opened the box, hand-painted with
crimson and golden rhomboids, a grotesque parody of her own face jumped out at her, all pig-like
nose, freckles as large as ladybirds, and bulging blue eyes. Her mother had had to rock her on her lap
until Brienne stopped crying, and her father removed the toy, his face like thunder, never to let
Brienne see it again. After that, Anyta Tarth stopped writing to her brother (not that he ever replied,
except to send that dreadful toy), and neither Pod nor Sansa ever received any ‘presents’ from their
Uncle Tywin. Small mercies, Brienne thought, a shudder running down her arms at the memory,
long buried, of her terror before that jack-in-the-box, almost as big as she was then, of her mother’s
soft hands stroking her hair.

Well, Brienne thought as she watched Tywin in the photograph, undaunted by his churlish gaze and
ramrod posture, I don’t suppose I will ever have to have anything to do with him.

She examined her parents instead. Her mother, smiling hugely, lost in the yards of her wedding
dress. Her father, his grin shy but his uniform fitting him like a second skin.

Would it fit me? Brienne wondered. She had no interest in wedding dresses and their silly symbolism
of purity, virtue on the verge of willing destruction, like a ripe fruit which bruises at the first touch.
She had no idea if her father had kept Anyta’s wedding dress, though she doubted it, and it wouldn’t
have fit Brienne anyway. Selwyn’s uniform, though…

Her father never lost the habits of order and punctuality he learned in the army. His was a predictable
mind. Brienne did not need to wonder whether he might have kept his parade uniform, or where.

She opened the footlocker by the bed, moved aside the extra blanket folded on top, and there it was.
Blue serge, a spotless shirt, the rack of medals, ready to pin onto the breast. The shoes, polished so
Brienne could see herself in them, a dark smudge against the moon-bright night. Brienne ran her
fingers over the fabric of the uniform, still telling herself she would not do it.

She stood and took off her polka-dot pajamas, the bottoms barely skimming her ankles after her latest
growth spurt. She put on the shirt, the trousers, the blue jacket with its sharp shoulders, strict shoulders, clothes cut to make the wearer stand at attention and be accounted for. The shoes were far too big for her, and it was too hot to wear shoes anyway. She toyed with the medals for a moment, but then put them back. She and her father had discussed the possibility of Brienne joining the army after she finished school, though Selwyn preferred her to go to university, and Brienne was not certain she could follow orders with blind obedience, especially if she did not understand why a particular war was being fought.

Trying on her father’s uniform was a way of following in his footsteps, she told herself. Putting on his medals would have been decorating herself with another bird’s bright feathers.

She put the medals back. They landed on something that sounded like tissue paper, a crumpling sound, a smell like old talcum powder.

Brienne pulled the paper-wrapped object out of the footlocker. It was a crown: a wedding wreath made of white silk roses and lilies of the valley, with artificial pearls to simulate dewdrops. Her mother’s wedding wreath, kept all this time in amongst her father’s mementoes of courage and glory.

Brienne turned it around and around in her hands, held it up against the moonlight. It looked like a crown made of real flowers with real dew, a crown for a Maiden’s Day outing, a crown for a girl in a chiffon dress who would go dancing with goblins and fairies at night. It looked small and fragile in Brienne’s large, clumsy fingers. One of the silk roses came out of the paper wrapping squashed.

Suddenly Brienne felt silly, dressed in bits of her father’s uniform, barefoot and holding her mother’s bridal wreath, but she didn’t want to return it to the footlocker, not when she had just uncovered it, a treasure stolen from a grave. A piece of her mother’s life and hopes. So Brienne popped the crown onto her head and went in search of a mirror, to see if she looked as silly as she suspected she did.

She didn’t hazard the upstairs bathroom, and Sansa’s room was out of the question. She crept down the stairs and looked at herself in the mirror above the fireplace in the sitting room.

She looked good. Some of that was the play of moonlight and shadows, but some of that was how well her father’s uniform fit her tall, broad-shouldered physique. True, the jacket was too big through the shoulders, the sleeves and trouser legs far too long, but the fitted cut could have been made for Brienne with the idea that she would grow into it. Even her mother’s wedding crown did not look out of place perched on the bird’s nest of Brienne’s sleep-mussed hair. Her father liked her to wear her hair at least shoulder-length, and no amount of combing would tame it. With the dewy roses caught in the straw-like strands, Brienne looked almost regal, almost soldierly. She grinned at her reflection in the mirror with a rare and genuine pleasure, and saw the moon peeking in at her through the downstairs window.

She would go outside. It was so obvious. Outside, the moon could work its magic much better. Maybe Brienne could be transformed into something rich and strange even without dancing with goblins or hoping for some stupid prince to come along and kiss her.

She fumbled with the latch on the front door, turned the key quietly, quietly, so as not to bring Mrs. Roelle lumbering down the hallway with a poker in her hand, proof against grumpkins and burglars alike. Brienne let herself out, her daytime self extinguished like a candle flame between two dark fingers as soon as she stepped outside.

She was alone in the night, alone with the night. No owl called, no lost cow mooed for its barn anywhere on the island. A breeze was finally coming over the hill, from the open sea, carrying the scent of hay and salt, water and earth combined. Brienne’s bare feet left a visible trail in the wet, brittle grass, the cuffs of her father’s trousers getting wet. She stopped to roll them up. When she
straightened, she was alone, the last human, the last woman at the end of the world. She spread her arms wide and threw back her head, drinking in the white trail of stars spanning the sky. She was Maiden, Warrior, Crone and Stranger, all in one. The night was hers. She laughed out loud, and the night swallowed her voice.

Brienne’s feet moved of their own accord, took up the en garde position. Her arms swept through the thick night air and faced an invisible opponent. She saluted with a sword made of air and starlight, and struck. Back and forth she danced, striking and parrying, her faceless challenger’s sword always responding, always where she knew it would be. If she fought like this at Bitterbridge, no one there would dare laugh at her.

She stopped, sweat beetling her brow, gathering on her upper lip, and straightened the wreath, gone askew on her head in the heat of the duel. She should fetch her sword from her room. Then she could really dance.

As though it heard her thoughts, a wisp of sea wind caught the door handle and closed the front door behind her. She heard it snick shut with the finality of an oubliette door closing forever, and no amount of tugging on the door handle would open it again: the latch had fallen.

Brienne did not dare rattle the door handle or knock. How would she explain to Mrs. Roelle what she was doing out here, the night closer to dawn than to midnight, in her father’s best uniform, with her mother’s wedding wreath on her head and no shoes. She was blushing and sweating, feeling more foolish and smaller, younger, than at any other time she could remember. She could not wait outside until Mrs. Roelle got up to make breakfast, and she could not break in without bringing the whole house down on her head. She imagined what Mrs. Roelle would say, Sansa and Pod’s faces. Her father’s face. No. He must never find out.

She had left her bedroom window open. It came to her in a flash as if the moon had crashed into the sea, and she tore around the side of the house, ignoring the sharp pain of a rock hidden in grass cutting her bare foot, to look up, through the branches of the apple tree, at her salvation. She had climbed that tree many times, though not that summer. Its thick branches, laden with fruit and leaves, stopped posing a challenge for Brienne around the time she turned fourteen, but now the tree might just save her.

Chapter End Notes

Originally this was going to be a part of a single chapter, but then I decided to split it into two lest it be significantly longer than all the others. So, the conclusion to Brienne’s encounter with the night is coming next chapter.
Brienne was in the nighttime garden, the way back closed to her, her only hope the apple tree outside her window.

She considered taking off her father’s uniform and carrying it with her as a bundle she could wedge between branches while she climbed, but thought better of it. She could not face the prospect of climbing the tree in nothing but her cotton smallclothes and stolen crown of silk roses. Whatever power she may have snatched from the borrowed clothes, from the borrowed night, melted away on the treacherous moonlight. She had strength enough to climb the tree, and the clothes would come with her, but would be no help. Brienne stood alone, and the night was not her friend.

She became aware of a patch of deeper darkness on a low branch, a focal point of the night, and she nearly started away from the tree, as though its malignant spirit had come out to see who trespassed on its domain. But then the patch of darkness grew two yellow eyes. It meowed.

“Red Ronnet!” Brienne breathed, half sobbed, and scratched the cat’s ears. She had never been so happy to see the fat tom. She was not all alone, however dubious the company.

Brienne tried to move the cat out of the way so she could grab the branch he sat on and pull herself up, but Red Ronnet hissed at her and would not move, grown heavy as a furry cannonball under Brienne’s nervous hands. Finally she left the cat alone and used a nearby branch to hoist herself up off the ground.

She was standing on the lowest branches, one foot on the one occupied by Red Ronnet, the other foot feeling for safe purchase on a higher branch, when she felt warm fur brush against her calf, and then a lancing pain. Brienne hissed and nearly let go of the branches in her hands so she could bend down and rub her stinging ankle. She heard rather than saw Red Ronnet jump out of the tree and vanish in the grass, his work done. Her ankle throbbed ferociously, a hot, pulsing ache, and she wondered briefly if the cat had rabies. But at least he was gone, and she was still in the tree.

She started to climb.

She did not remember it being such hard going when she was younger and smaller. The tree was jungle-like, thick with ripe fruit and leaves which smelled of growth and health, as though taunting Brienne. Some branches creaked ominously under her weight. Others offered safe footholds, yet sprouted smaller branches which clawed at Brienne’s face and hands and feet like she was climbing a tree full of cats, a tree which bore a hundred Red Ronnets to torment her. Apples rained down around her, hitting her arms and shoulders, landing on the ground with muffled, overripe thuds. Brienne got a mouthful of leaves more than once, yet she soldiered on, even though twigs caught in her hair and tugged like hands, even though she heard, felt the fabric of her father’s uniform snag and rip more than once.

Finally, finally, after what seemed like hours though there was still no trace of dawn on the horizon, she was nearly within reach of her bedroom window. Even so, she had to practically jump in order to reach it. She felt herself airborne for a second, suspended between the tree and the ground like a squirrel, then she crashed through the window and fell face down on the floor of her bedroom. Miraculously, nobody woke up. Brienne only realized that she was crying when she felt the sting of salt in the scratches on her face. Her left cheekbone throbbed dully where it had hit the floor upon
She got up, legs shaking as though she had just run too far, too fast, and took off her father’s uniform. She shook her fist at the mocking, round moon outside her window, feeling victorious and defiant, yet could not face going into her father’s bedroom to fetch her pajamas. In the morning. Morning would come soon enough. Brienne clutched Bear in a crushing embrace and hid under her covers, exhaustion taking her before she could even settle into her favorite sleeping position, on her side, face to the wall.

In the morning, Brienne saw plain as day that the uniform was ruined.

The late-summer sunshine poured through the window, merciless and suffering no concealment, no shadows which would soften or half hide the truth. There were numerous tears on the jacket and trousers, the blue serge rent by twigs as by claws. The cuff of one trouser leg was rent by claws, and one sleeve dangled from a savaged hem. The shirt had fared little better, its cuffs chewed up by the tree. Everything was flecked with blood, from Brienne’s scratched ankle, her face, her hands. She checked her bed and saw the sheets were smeared as though she had rolled around on them while on her monthlies.

And what of the wreath? It was not on Brienne’s head, there was nothing but apple leaves caught in her hair. It was not on the floor or in her bed, which looked as though a bride had been slaughtered, not merely bedded in it. Brienne approached the window with a leaden feeling like the knowledge of certain doom in her belly.

The wreath hung from a branch, too far for her to reach from the window, a white bird’s nest tipped on its side. How did it get so far, so high, higher than she had reached in the climb? The artificial pearls caught the sunlight like the eyes and teeth of children laughing at Brienne in the schoolyard. Her eyes prickle with tears, she squeezed her hands into fists, but there was no one there to fight, no one to whom to tell her woe. Her father was not there, and she had ruined one of his most precious mementoes.

“You fool,” she breathed through bitten, chapped lips, “you fool.” She loathed herself.

“Brienne, breakfast!” Mrs. Roelle shouted from downstairs. She never bothered to climb the stairs and knock on the door, and for once Brienne was grateful for it.

“I’m not hungry,” she called back.

“Are you ill, dear?”

“No!” Brienne swallowed thickly, tamped down the panic rising in her throat. What if the old witch broke the habit of a lifetime and came up after all, insisted on coming into the room to feel Brienne’s forehead and make clucking noises about too much time spent in the sun? “I didn’t sleep well last night, I think I’ll try and sleep a little now.”

“Well, all right, dear. If you get hungry later, there’s bread and cheese in the larder,” Mrs. Roelle called, and Brienne breathed a sigh of relief. She could hear Sansa asking if she and Pod could share Brienne’s bacon.

Brienne folded the tattered remains of her father’s uniform as neatly as he had taught her, as though that might somehow conceal or repair the damage. She would wait until Mrs. Roelle took Sansa and Pod to the village to go grocery shopping, and then she would return the uniform to the footlocker and clean herself up and see about putting some ice on her swollen, bruised cheek. She had no idea what to do about her sheets, but she would think of something before the next wash day. Maybe no
one would notice the wedding crown so high up in the tree. And when her father returned from his trip, Brienne would confess her crime and accept whatever punishment he meted out. She would withdraw from the swordfighting championship in Bitterbridge, ask for no pocket money for a year, anything. The thought of her father’s broad, kindly face set in a stone mask of anger and disappointment brought tears to her eyes again. She rubbed them with the heels of her hands until her eyes and the scratches on her hands alike burned.

Bees buzzed under her window, attracted by the windfall of apples Brienne had shaken out of the tree. She stood and slammed the window shut, plunging her room in stifling quiet.

Mrs. Roelle, Pod and Sansa were not long gone, and Brienne had just finished smoothing the extra blanket on top of the remnants of the uniform in the footlocker, a fancy coffin for a corpse mangled beyond recognition, when the doorbell rang. Brienne nearly tripped over Red Ronnet on the way to the door, felt too distracted to take a swipe at the cat for its nighttime treachery.

A boy with a motorbike. A telegram. Brienne gave him a few copper stars she had in the pocket of her shorts as a tip, ignored the way he stared at the bruise on her cheek, at her scratched and scoured flesh.

A telegram.

She held it in her hand until sweat from her fingers soaked through the envelope, dyed it with the black ink of the missive inside. She did not need to open it to know what it would say. Dark wings, dark words, the old saying went. Mrs. Roelle was fond of saying telegrams with their greasy black letters had replaced ravens in that regard.

Brienne opened the envelope, though she already knew what she would find inside.

Their father had arranged his lecture tour in a north-south succession of cities, starting in Braavos. He was on the last leg of his journey, a week away from homecoming. His airship had crashed into the sea between Lys and Volantis, just fell out of the blue sky. No storms were reported, no survivors found. Suspected engine failure, the telegram said, but Brienne knew better. Pod was right, steel ships were almost as bad as airships. Had their father taken a regular, seagoing vessel, it would have sunk, a wave would have flipped it over, it would have broken up like the wooden ships of old, the ones Pod thought so superior. Because it was not a squall or a faulty engine which had killed Selwyn Tarth. Brienne had done that. She had done something she had known she shouldn’t, she had violated the delicate balance, and chaos had poured in through the crack thus opened in the fabric of the world, smooth and fragile as an eggshell.

Brienne walked past the indifferent Red Ronnet, her every step weighed down by the guilt of the world (guilt for the world), and dragged herself upstairs as one going up to the gallows.

When Mrs. Roelle came back from the village, weighed down with food and cleaning supplies, Pod trailing her with a new boat kit in his arms and Sansa carrying a huge bunch of wild flowers she had picked along the way, the house was as still as the grave, though considerably warmer. Mrs. Roelle thought nothing of it as she put potatoes on to boil and took out cold cuts for the children’s meal. When Brienne failed to respond to her summons, she realized she would have to climb the stairs and fetch the girl herself, could she possibly still be asleep, really it was most inconsiderate to Mrs. Roelle’s poor knees…

She found Brienne in Selwyn Tarth’s bedroom. The girl had completely wrecked it. The pillows and blanket were slashed to pieces, the mattress underneath hacked and slashed with what proved to be Brienne’s practice sword, which lay on the floor amidst the wreckage, its blade broken two thirds of the way down. Brienne had broken the clock against the far wall, torn up her parents’ wedding
photograph, and smashed her father’s swordfighting trophy against the floor until it was squashed and bent as though melted. She had hacked off her own hair unevenly, so close to the skull she had pulled several locks out by the roots. She must have scratched her own arms and legs in her hysteria, for there were dried blood and angry red welts scored into the girl’s freckly skin.

She sat hunched up on the floor next to her father’s open footlocker, in a mess of scraps of blue serge and tissue paper, like a bird in a particularly messy nest. In her large fist was a twist of paper. Its black ink had smudged Brienne’s hands and clothes, and so Mrs. Roelle guessed what its contents must be even before she pried it out of Brienne’s hand, took her reading glasses out of her apron pocket, and established the irrevocable truth for herself.

“Oh, you poor dear,” she murmured, trying to put her arms around the tall girl. Brienne’s face was buried in her knees. She keened wordlessly, completely unaware of her surroundings. Mrs. Roelle could no more hug her than she could hug a log of wood.

Mrs. Roelle came back to the kitchen just as Pod and Sansa were finishing their meal. She sent Pod to fetch the doctor from the village, telling him Brienne was feeling poorly. The telegram she folded and put in her apron pocket.

“Is Brienne sick?” Sansa asked, her lovely face scrunched up with worry.

Mrs. Roelle thought how much she would miss this lovely little girl, and the quiet, serious boy too. She stroked Sansa’s hair and gave her a too-large helping of apple pudding for dessert. A full stomach would anchor the little one in the hard times that were about to begin, as soon as Pod returned with the doctor and the truth of Selwyn Tarth’s death came out.

Mr. Tarth was a good man, had been a good man. But now there was nothing else for it, so far as Mrs. Roelle was concerned, but to put Sansa down for a nap on the sitting-room sofa, and give Red Ronnet some mashed potatoes with gravy while she waited. Brienne would come out of the state she’d worked herself into eventually. As for what would happen to the children, well. They were not, after all, Mrs. Roelle’s family. She was already thinking about how to phrase an ad seeking a new position, a new home for herself and Red Ronnet, when she heard Pod come back with the doctor, talking excitedly about the new model ship he was about to begin making.

Chapter End Notes

The end of this chapter will be the only major break from Brienne’s POV, since she was out of it mentally and some things had to be shown for which she was not physically present. And I did want to give Mrs. Roelle her just dues.
Brienne floated, as weightless as she had been in her mother’s womb, in a soft, all-blurring, all-forgiving cloud of milk of the poppy. When the doctor allowed her to surface, several days had passed, and the leaves on the treacherous apple tree leering at her through the window were starting to show the first traces of yellow and brown along their edges, as much from summer heat as from the approaching autumn.

Her pillow was strewn with yellow hairs of uneven length: Mrs. Roelle had tried to even out the short strands of Brienne’s hair while she slept. She no longer looked like she had a nest made by a very untidy bird on top of her head. She looked like a field of wheat carelessly reaped. The effect was brutal, which Brienne liked. She felt brutal, savage. She felt like the girl who had rent the world apart, and should wear a visible marker of her misdeeds for all the world to see. She avoided her own eye in the mirror while brushing her teeth or passing the fireplace in the sitting room, where she had seen herself as not-ugly and been lured outside by the moon.

Brienne’s cuts and scrapes were healing, her left cheek was no longer swollen and bruised. Her heart felt buried, muffled under her heavy flesh, yet she could still walk and talk and eat. She would have liked to bury the remains of her father’s uniform on top of the hill overlooking the sea, as far away from the apple tree as she could get on their family property, but Mrs. Roelle had cleaned up the mess Brienne had made long before she came back from the land of the grieving asleep. It didn’t seem right. No remains of Selwyn Tarth were found, so no remains could be sent home for burial. He had always loved the sea, yet they ought to have been able to bury something of his in solid ground.

What is dead may never die, said the followers of the Drowned God on the Iron Islands, but Brienne saw no comfort in such reasoning. Dead was dead, gone forever.

She felt heavy and dull as the earth, her father’s bones lay buried inside her. She carried the knowledge of what she had done like an unwanted pregnancy, a burden on her every breath. Yet she did not cry. She had no right to cry, when it was all her fault.

“It’s all on you now, dear,” Mrs. Roelle told her as they sat in the kitchen one day.

Brienne was peeling potatoes because Mrs. Roelle had told her to while the housekeeper knit a pair of grey woolen socks for Pod, a going-away present. In the sitting room, the auctioneer was placing little white stickers on all of the Tarth family’s belongings. Only after he was dead did it become evident just how necessary Selwyn Tarth’s lecture tours had been, compounding Brienne’s guilt. There was no money, everything they had was in that house, and the house itself, though old and solidly built and picturesque, was worth less than the land on which it stood. Mrs. Roelle had already found another position, and the children rattled around inside the house thick with their parents’ ghosts as in a limbo, waiting to see to which of the seven hells they would be consigned. Leaves fell from the apple tree, past the window behind Brienne’s back. She always sat in the chair in front of the window now, so she wouldn’t have to look outside and see it.

“Pod and Sansa will need you now, more than ever,” Mrs. Roelle continued. “You must be a little mother to them.”

Brienne thought that this was the worst thing Mrs. Roelle could possibly have said to her, but the
woman seemed oblivious to Brienne’s horror. How could she be a mother, little or otherwise, to her siblings, when she had never even been able to picture herself married, let alone with children of her own? When she had done something she knew she shouldn’t have, and as a direct result of her actions their father was gone, buried at sea like the sailors from stories Pod loved?

She did not know what Pod and Sansa were thinking, what they were feeling. Pod spent all of his time on his model boats now, even more time than usual. Sometimes he would not come for meals no matter how loudly Mrs. Roelle called upstairs. Sansa swung wildly between giggles and tears, play and storm. She would ask after Papa then run off chasing grasshoppers in the garden, shrieking more loudly than she was wont to do before. Brienne imagined they must be sad, they must miss Papa terribly, but she could not bring herself to ask them, to offer comfort. How could she, knowing what she knew?

Brienne watched the grey sock Mrs. Roelle was knitting, the sort of sock no little boy would willingly wear, though Pod might, out of a sense of duty. If Brienne could get him away from his boats long enough to wrestle him into the dratted things.

A little mother.

“I asked Papa’s lawyer what’s to become of us, but he said I should ask you,” she said accusingly. Mrs. Roelle was not family, why couldn’t the lawyer see that Brienne was the head of this household now? “I’ve been thinking. Once everything has been sold, if there is any money left I could rent some rooms in the village. I could quit school and get a job. Take proper care of Pod and Sansa.”

She had no idea if she could really do it, or if she even wanted to. But defiance was easier than tears and guilt.

Mrs. Roelle’s knitting needles were motionless in her hands as she peered at Brienne over them like a witch over divining sticks, the moment before she spelled out someone’s doom. “Oh dear,” she said. “He should have told you. Making me do it, I really don’t know.” She sighed, resumed knitting as a shield against Brienne’s penetrating gaze. “You will go to your Uncle Tywin. It’s all been decided.”

“Who decided it?” Brienne asked, anger making her voice sharp.

Mrs. Roelle ignored her tone. “He will take all three of you, which is very kind of him. It is not right for families to be separated.” She leveled an honest look at Brienne. “They would never allow you to live on your own, Brienne. Maybe when you come of age, but not now. And if you went to a children’s home, who knows what might happen?”

Brienne felt as though her breast were deflating like a bicycle tire. She still raged a little inside, but she knew this was the plain truth, and while the lawyer hadn’t seen fit to tell her as much, at least Mrs. Roelle did. Brienne bowed her head and rummaged for an unpeeled potato to occupy her hands.

“We don’t know him,” she murmured. “We’ve never met him, and Mama stopped keeping in touch with him. We don’t even know where he lives.”

“Why, he lives in King’s Landing, where he has always lived! It’ll be nice for you, a young lady in the big city.”

Brienne tried to imagine it, and failed. She could not see herself playing the debutante, the wild young thing, out and about all night at balls and soirees, nor could she conjure up King’s Landing as anything more than flat pictures seen in books, on postcards. The Red Keep, the Great Sept of Baelor – the names were meaningless, small pieces of colored paper, no more substantial than steam
rising out of a hot bath. She couldn’t imagine living there, in those two-dimensional colored vistas.

“He was a toymaker,” she said, remembering the jack-in-the-box, three-dimensional and terrifying.

“Still is, dear. From what the lawyer said, he is quite renowned, in his own way. _Tywin Lannister’s Wonders and Novelties_ is the name of his shop. It sounds terribly exciting. And he has a family, of course.”

“A wife and a son.” Brienne was remembering the wedding photograph she had ripped up in her fury, Tywin’s ghostly family standing behind him, obscured by his black suit, her mother’s flying wedding dress.

“Two sons.”

“Sorry?”

“Two sons, I said. They’ll be about your age, I should imagine. And an aunt. A woman to help guide you.”

Mrs. Roelle smiled. Brienne didn’t. She stood up, rounded the kitchen table, and gave the startled woman a hug. Brienne normally never touched Mrs. Roelle unless she absolutely had to, to pass the salt or help bring in the washing.

“Thank you, Mrs. Roelle,” she whispered into the woman’s hair. “You’ve been so kind.”

Mrs. Roelle’s hands fluttered like birds over Brienne’s arms and back, like she was torn between feeling moved and objecting to Brienne’s touch. “Hush, dear, it’s nothing.”

The morning of their departure dawned grey of sky and golden of leaf, early September yet the year already rushing to its end. Brienne’s first thought on waking was that school had started over a week ago, yet neither she nor Pod had attended even once. She imagined Uncle Tywin had made arrangements for them to start school in King’s Landing. Catching up with lessons would give them something to do, help smooth out the transition. Lying in her bed, she looked out of her window for the last time and saw the silk rose crown, stained by the first rains of autumn, rocking gently on a sea breeze, as though waving her a mocking goodbye.

Mrs. Roelle gave each of them a wet kiss on the cheek by way of farewell, then she hefted her suitcase and the basket in which Red Ronnet dozed, and went on to her new life. Swaying with the ferry which took them to the mainland, then boarding the train with their belongings, Brienne imagined herself, Sansa and Pod as castaways, survivors of a shipwreck, tossed up like so much flotsam onto the shore of the world. She had forbidden Mrs. Roelle from sewing black armbands onto their coats as a sign of mourning, but even so she felt people looking at her, at the three of them, with pity and idle concern. Their eyes froze Brienne into a statue. She would not cry in front of these strangers, who passed them by, caring nothing, seeing nothing but an ugly girl in charge of two children.

Pod spent the train journey sitting as quietly as he always did, fussing with the sails on his latest model boat. Sansa jumped on the seats and called out ‘Kiss Ladding, Kiss Ladding’ at every country stop, until she got tired and lay down on Brienne’s lap, awake and mostly quiet while Brienne combed her long reddish-blond hair with her fingers. It soothed Brienne even more than it did Sansa. It gave Brienne a handhold in the nowhere time which was their train journey into the unknown, the imagined city at the end of it like an open dragon’s maw waiting to swallow them.

Pod looked up from his boat, his eyes troubled. “How will we know where to go, when we get
“Someone will meet us at the station.” Brienne had no idea whether this was true, but she found that the tone used by parents to reassure fretful children came naturally to her.

“But how will they know us? We’ve never seen each other.”

“They’ll recognize three children traveling alone.” She wasn’t a child, but it felt safer lumping herself in the same category as Pod and Sansa. Children could not be blamed for their actions and misdeeds. “Don’t worry, Pod. Uncle Tywin will be there to fetch us.”

This seemed to satisfy him. By then, the train was entering the first outlying districts of the capital. Smokestacks and railway yards and shabby houses with even shabbier yards gradually gave way to broader and broader streets. Brienne glimpsed a large building between tenements, up on a hill, a building which glistened red in the afternoon sun as though it were painted in fresh blood, and then they were at the train station, and Sansa sat up and rubbed her eyes and looked out of the carriage window in awe.

Brienne looked around their compartment. They had three suitcases, one each, though Sansa’s was fairly small, and Pod also had his model boat.

“Pod, you take your boat and go find a porter. I’ll carry Sansa.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, we meet the Lannister lads!
Extraordinary Creatures

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Brienne stepped off the train and into a pandemonium of steam, soot, hawkers, travelers, station guards, newspaper vendors, dogs, loiterers. There were more people at the station than lived in the village near their old home on Tarth, and it was very noisy. Someone shoved Brienne from behind so she almost lost her grip on Sansa, was grateful she had not risked letting the little girl walk on her own and just holding her hand.

Where was Uncle Tywin? Brienne realized she expected to see a tall man in a top hat and a black suit, and knew that was absurd. She should be looking for a face she recognized, but she couldn’t recall his face from the old photograph she had destroyed.

Then her attention was snagged by two men. They were leaning against a wrought-iron fence topped by cruel spikes, drinking something hot out of paper cups, and watching her train. It was their stillness which attracted Brienne first, for they seemed to have created an empty, quiet area around them in the midst of the whirlwind, and none dared trespass into their space. They looked nothing alike at first sight, and yet were obviously brothers. Brienne could not decide which one she found more astonishing.

One looked to be some years older than Brienne, and was tall, supple, and very beautiful, despite the shabbiness of his corduroy trousers, nearly worn through at the knees, and his blond hair being just a bit too long. It brushed the collar of his odd, blue jacket with lots of brass buttons, a rather military-looking garment, though Brienne could tell it wasn’t really military. He hadn’t shaved in a day or two, and what little sunlight filtered down through the station’s sooty glass ceiling caught on his chin and in his hair like specks of gold. He looked like a prince playing dress-up as a pauper as he leant carelessly against the iron fence. He raised his cup to his mouth with a graceful, showy gesture, a gesture which said look at me! as well as what are you staring at, guttersnipe? He cocked his head to catch a remark made by his companion, and grinned in response, a wolfish, blinding grin.

The other man was a dwarf. Brienne felt a stab of shame at noticing that first, she, who was always being judged and found wanting for her size and face alone. Nevertheless, the fact remained. A dwarf. He looked young, though whether older or younger than the tall, blond man was difficult to tell. He wore a pin-striped suit that looked handmade, a man’s suit in a child size. His hair was blond as well, though not as bright as his brother’s, for brothers they surely were, cast from the same mold, one in alabaster, the other in terracotta. The longer Brienne watched them, the more similarities she noticed. They had the same jaw, the same crooked smile, the same way of standing as though the commotion of the station concerned them not in the least, amused at some private joke you might become privy to if you took the chance to speak with them.

No one spoke to them. They might have owned the station and come to survey their domain, disguised as traveling mummers, for all the attention anyone except Brienne paid them.

The tall one finished his drink and threw his empty cup over the fence behind him with a smooth, discus-throwing gesture, then went back to raking the length of the train with his eyes. Green eyes, Brienne noticed, green like the Sunset Sea in pictures she had seen. His stormy, windswept gaze washed over Brienne where she stood. She felt submerged in it, resisted the impulse to check if there was a puddle forming around her feet. She saw him nudge his brother and start toward her with a jolt of panic. Mrs. Roelle’s parting words about watching out for strangers who lurked around train stations looking for country girls to rob and despoil rushed in on her, but then the blond man was
right in front of her, and she saw that they were the same height, and he was young, almost as young as she.

“You must be Brienne,” he said, looking her straight in the eye. He said it as though she were the one who needed her identity confirmed, he already knew what was what.

_Must I be Brienne?_ she thought, feeling slow, her brain turned to custard. “Yes,” she said. “I am.”

His gaze dropped down to Sansa, who was alert in Brienne’s arms and peering at the newcomers with wary curiosity. “Let me take her,” he said, already reaching for the little girl. Brienne took an instinctive step back, and he quirked a half smile at her. “I’m not going to eat her. At least,” the smile grew into that lopsided, lupine grin, “not in front of all these people.” His teeth were very straight, oh what big teeth you have.

Sansa uttered a tiny whimper, and the other man spoke up with gentle admonishment. “Jaime, you’re scaring the girl.”

_Which one of us does he mean?_ Brienne wondered, looked down to see that the dwarf was smiling at her warmly, and that only one of his eyes was green, while the other was of a black so dark she couldn’t see the pupil.

“My name is Tyrion,” the dwarf said, offering Brienne a formal bow that immediately put her at ease, so absurd did it look in the middle of the crowded, dirty train station, “and my big brother here is called Jaime. I assure you he is quite adept at handling small people. I am living proof.”

This last bit was aimed at Sansa, who returned Tyrion’s smile with a bright smile of her own and held out her arms, one to each brother. Jaime took her easily, settled her in the crook of his arm as though he had been carrying her all her life. Only when Sansa was gone from Brienne’s arms and twining her tiny fingers in Jaime’s long hair did Brienne realize she had surrendered her baby sister to men she had just met and she had no idea where Pod was, but then she looked at the brothers one more time and things fell into place. Two brothers. Two sons.

“You are Uncle Tywin’s sons,” she said with enormous relief, was answered by a polite nod from Tyrion and an ironically arched eyebrow from Jaime. “I… I didn’t know until a few days ago there are two of you.”

“It happens sometimes,” Jaime said, “that more than one child is born to a couple wedded and bedded.” He spoke with a distinctive drawl, like his words were too precious to scatter haphazardly, and everyone within hearing range should stop and pay attention, for he was not going to repeat himself.

Brienne blushed, wondered if he was making fun of her on purpose. They’d only just met, why would he? Then she saw Tyrion scowl up at his brother, and guessed that this was simply Jaime’s way, to speak to everyone like they were too stupid to be worth his time. She also realized with a start that Tyrion was very young, closer to her own age. _His big brother_, he had called Jaime. Though Mrs. Roelle had mentioned Uncle Tywin’s family, it never occurred to Brienne until just now that his sons would be distinct people, with their own personalities she would have to learn and become used to.

As she stood thus musing, Pod came up behind her with a porter in tow. “He came to me,” he announced proudly. “He asked me if I needed a porter, and called me ‘sir.’ Imagine that! Sir!”

He was still delighted at this new experience while Brienne made the introductions, then they all trooped off toward the taxi rank in a disorderly procession. Brienne was still fretting, but at least Pod
was there, their luggage was there, and Sansa’s head rested on Jaime’s shoulder, her eyes half closed, looking well satisfied to stay where she was for the rest of the day.

“Why didn’t Uncle Tywin come to meet us himself?” Brienne asked, and instantly felt churlish. Tyrion and Jaime would think she was not grateful for their effort.

“He was called away on business,” Tyrion explained, his walk more of a waddle as he tried to keep up with Brienne’s strides. She shortened her footsteps, and was rewarded with a smile. “Very important toymaker business. He never says what it is, and we do not ask. He did, however, leave money for a taxi, in what I assure you was an unaccustomed attack of generosity on his part.”

“He didn’t want to entrust either of us with the money,” Jaime chimed in. He was two steps ahead of Brienne and Tyrion, and half turned to grin at Brienne over Sansa’s head. “Eventually he decided he trusted me even less than he trusted Tyrion, but someone had to carry your things, and so here we both are.”

“I imagine Father realized I would be able to run less far and less fast while weighed down by twenty whole stags’ worth of taxi money,” Tyrion said dryly.

A moment crept past during which Brienne wondered what she should say to that, then the brothers erupted into startlingly similar laughs, loud and jolly and just a tad forced. A private joke, then, she need not respond at all. She was safe.

At the taxi rank, Pod looked down at Tyrion and asked shyly if Tyrion would like the tip-up seat which faced the wide back seat. Tyrion relinquished it with a magnanimous gesture.

“I should really sit in the big seat and pretend to be a grownup,” he said, earning Pod’s gratitude and approval. With Sansa by now asleep on Jaime’s lap, her head pillowed on his chest where she drooled a little on his blue jacket, that left only Brienne uncertain what to think or how to behave around the Lannister brothers.

She sat in the middle, feeling squashed and surrounded, and tried to puzzle out their ages. Tyrion could not have been older than eighteen or so, and Jaime a few years older still, yet Brienne felt as though continents and centuries separated them from her, sixteen and countrified and terrified and ugly and at a loss for something to say. The brothers smelled of sawdust and turpentine and alehouses and tobacco. They smelled like the city and like men, a scent the likes of which Brienne had occasionally detected around her father, but on Tarth that male musk was always cut by the smells of the sea, of grass, of home. Not here. Here, it was everywhere, it clogged the air inside the taxi till Brienne felt like she would start sweating. Jaime’s thigh was pressed against hers, while Tyrion’s short legs barely dangled over the edge of the seat on her other side, his foot occasionally brushing her knee.

Pod was twisted around in the tip-up seat, watching the meter or looking out of the windshield, Brienne could not tell which. She leaned forward, touched his knee. “All right?” she asked.

He nodded vigorously. “It’s all terribly exciting.”

Mrs. Roelle’s words, but Mrs. Roelle was miles away, a sea and a kingdom away. Brienne was suddenly desperate for something to say, anything.

“It’s getting dark,” she said, could have slapped herself for the inanity.

Jaime’s grin was almost palpable in the deepening gloom. “The night is dark and full of terrors,” he intoned with mock solemnity.
Brienne frowned. Tyrion cleared his throat to get her to turn to him. “It’s the slogan of a new religion which is gaining popularity in the city. Some fire deity from the east. You will notice its devotees on the streets. They tend to wear a lot of red.”

“‘Red people,’ Tysha calls them,” Jaime said. “It’s short, makes it easier to write. You might as well know right now, she doesn’t talk.”

“Is that your mother’s name? Tysha?” Brienne asked, relieved at how easy small talk was proving to be.

The silence which descended in the wake of her question disabused her of any notion she may have started to entertain that the Lannisters would be easy to read and get along with. It was silence like a heavy blanket, made up of equal parts discomfort and wry amusement, the latter emanating from Jaime far more than Tyrion. Brienne wondered if Tysha was their housekeeper, if she may not have made a grievous faux pas just now.

“Tysha is our father’s wife,” Jaime said, each word enunciated. “Or near as. She stopped talking the day she climbed into his bed, so I suppose that makes them as good as married.”

Brienne had no idea what ‘as good as’ meant with reference to marriage. She knew she should keep quiet, but her curiosity would not let her be. “Your… stepmother?”

That got a reaction. Tyrion stiffened from head to toe as though trying not to cringe, while Jaime barked a loud laugh which woke Sansa. He soothed her back to slumber with his hand on her hair, unexpectedly gentle. Brienne wondered if she should take Sansa herself, jealous of his ease with the girl, of how Sansa had fallen asleep practically as soon as Jaime started carrying her.

“Tysha is our father’s common-law wife,” Jaime explained, still laughing a little.

“Oh,” was all Brienne could manage. She had no experience with such complicated human relationships. In her world, people were married or they were not, they had children or they did not. Except for Mrs. Roelle. Brienne was certain she had been ‘as good as’ married. Something to ponder.

Brienne did not get a chance to ponder it then, for Jaime was still talking. “You’ll get on fine. Tysha’s lovely, and a great cook.”

“Does she make bread pudding often?” Pod asked.

Jaime considered this. “No. No, I don’t think so.”

“Oh, good.” Pod exchanged a quick grin with Brienne. Good riddance to Mrs. Roelle and her bread puddings! At least one decent thing to come out of their new situation.

“She’s the soul of the house,” Jaime said, as though he were building a tower of words, something impressive yet precarious. “Without Tysha around, who knows where we’d be? We’d have probably cooked Father in the oven like a wicked witch in a story a long time ago. Tyrion would have run off and joined a mummers’ troupe with his fiddle.”

Brienne did not understand the joke, but she appreciated the effort at levity. “And you?” she asked Jaime, a smile starting to dawn on her face. “Where would you be?”

“Oh, probably dead in a ditch somewhere.”

Brienne was at a loss, again. More oddly, so was Tyrion, who sat very still beside her, saying
nothing, his head turned away as he stared out of the window at night descending over the city, wherever in the city they might be. Brienne wondered at how, after such a brief acquaintance, she could tell it was not like Tyrion (or Jaime) to stay quiet for long, and what it might mean.

“Where are we?” Pod asked, peering out of the same window as Tyrion.

“We just passed Cobbler Square,” the dwarf said in an absent tone, like he was pondering some great mystery yet too polite to ignore the boy. “We’re nearly home.”

*Home.* Tears prickled in Brienne’s eyes, she could feel them, held off for so long and now coming on with a vengeance. Jaime was watching her, she knew he could see the glint in her eyes despite the gathering dusk, the red suffusing her cheeks, her nose shiny as a lighthouse.

“Our mother died too,” he said, offering her no comfort, no easy attempt to make her feel better. Just marking out common ground. “When we were little.”

Tyrion was motionless beside Brienne. Jaime’s eyes were very green, the only color left in a darkening world. Brienne decided that she could hold back the tears a little longer, sensed that Jaime would not take it kindly if she said she was sorry for his loss. Anyway, she was more sorry for herself than for him just then.

“So we are all orphans,” she said quietly, the first time she had used that word. Immediately she felt terrible: Jaime and Tyrion’s father was still alive.

Jaime nodded. “All of us in the same boat.”

“Boat,” Pod said dreamily.

Chapter End Notes

For more information about the urban topography of King’s Landing, I direct you to the [map over on A Wiki of Ice and Fire](https://awoiaf.westeros.org).

Jaime and/or Tyrion will offer a twirl around the dance floor to anyone who leaves a comment about their first appearance in this fic. Or, you know, about other stuff in this chapter.
It was nearly full night by the time the taxi reached a small, cobblestoned square at the top of a steep, high hill. The square looked like a carryover from an earlier era, a time when open drains ran alongside houses and stepping in nightsoil was the least inconvenience facing a lone pedestrian out after dark.

The square was ringed by tall, old houses with small windows and steep roofs. Almost all of them had shops on the ground floor, with apartments above. All of the shops were open and lit. There was a greengrocer’s, the window full of red cabbages like deranged flowers and a mouthwatering pyramid of oranges. A butcher’s, the proprietor in his bloodstained apron visible through the glass amidst hanging sausages. A junk shop, what Mrs. Roelle would have called an antiques shop. A sweetshop with a red awning, its window filled with red decorations and advertisements for humbugs and firecrackers sold in anticipation of Bonfire Night. Brienne wondered what Bonfire Night was, and whether it involved actual bonfires or just paper decorations cut to look like scarlet flames licking up the sweetshop window.

Jaime told the taxi driver to stop right in the middle of the square. Everyone piled out while Tyrion paid: Pod with his boat, Jaime with Sansa in his arms, the little girl awake and trying to look everywhere at once, Brienne with empty hands and an apprehensive heart. This was it, the point of no return.

“Where is Uncle’s house?” Pod asked, looking around the square while the taxi driver brought out their suitcases. The streetlights were not yet on, and the only illumination came from shop windows.

“His shop,” Tyrion said. “We live above the shop.”

“Where?”

“There.”

Jaime opened his mouth to answer but Brienne beat him to it. She didn’t know she’d done it, her head was turned away from him. She was looking at a dark cavern of a shop, the tenement above it like a heavy, overhanging brow. The shop window was barely lit, but one could just about make out the outlines of a rocking horse and various dolls in it, under the red-and-yellow shop sign creaking in the wind. It was the sign which had attracted Brienne’s attention. She couldn’t read what it said at that distance, in the looming darkness, but the brilliant colors were the same as on the box which had housed that terrifying jack of her childhood.

“That’s right,” Jaime said, watching Brienne.

The sign said Tywin Lannister’s Wonders and Novelties, as though it advertised his two unusually named children. Or two horses. Brienne wondered how customers even found this shop, so far from
the city center, so invisible, without even the word ‘toys’ on the shop sign. Mrs. Roelle must have been right when she said Uncle Tywin was so famous he could eschew advertising. Or he thought advertising was beneath him.

Stuck in the glass pane under the ‘Open’ sign on the door was a calling card. It read: ‘Tyrion Lannister. Fiddle. Reels, jigs, ballads, songs of yore. Always available. Moderate fees.’

“That’s you!” Pod pointed out, impressed that someone had a special skill he did not possess himself. Tyrion offered another one of his very formal, utterly charming bows in reply. Brienne imagined the ability to stay courteous and dignified came in handy if ever customers complained they had ordered a fiddle player, not a dwarf act.

Jaime pushed open the door. It stuck on the mat for a moment, as though unwilling to let them in, but when he pushed again Sansa stretched out her little hand and pushed too, and the door opened, causing the bell above it to jangle. Jaime grinned at Sansa, and she blushed and hid her face in his jacket, peeking up at him from under a fall of red hair.

The shop was dim, the window grimy. There was a long mahogany counter with numerous cubbies behind it, filled with oddly shaped packages, some wrapped in plain brown paper, others in every variety of colorfully patterned gift paper known to man. But for those packages, it could have been a herbalist’s shop or an odd sort of mortuary with very small casket samples. Brienne thought again of Uncle Tywin coming to his sister’s wedding dressed like an undertaker. A heavy brown velvet curtain separated the shop from the living quarters beyond. A pad of paper and a pencil lay on the counter.

“This is for Tysha, isn’t it?” Brienne asked. “So she can serve customers when she’s alone?”

Jaime nodded. “It helps, seeing as she can’t talk.”

“Speak,” Brienne said absently. Jaime and Tyrion’s silence had a heavy quality, like a hand with dry skin. Brienne turned from contemplating the pad and pencil, and found their four eyes (three green, one black) intent on her. Her face grew hot under their scrutiny. “She cannot speak. In spoken words. She can talk. Writing is talking.”

She gestured at the pad vaguely, feeling stupid. Jaime’s gaze was assessing in a way she could not read, while Tyrion offered her a half smile, as though she had just performed unexpectedly well on a surprise test. Like a dog jumping through a hoop, Brienne thought grouchily. She suddenly realized that Jaime wore a firefighter’s jacket. That was why the blue material and brass buttons brought to mind a uniform. It was a uniform, of sorts.

Before she could wonder why he wore such an outlandish garment or where he could have found it, the velvet curtain shifted to reveal a woman framed in a spill of light which stabbed their eyes, leaving afterimages of spinning fiery wheels. The woman herself seemed to glow for a moment. Even after she let the curtain drop partway and advanced into the dim shop, she carried some of the light in her hair, which was so dark it seemed glossy, with a sheen on it like polished wood. She was so pale she looked like a flower grown in a dark room, which never saw the sun and would wilt instantly if it did. She was much shorter than Brienne, skinny, and dressed like Mrs. Roelle, in a shapeless black sweater and a bedraggled black skirt. The heel of one of her black socks was darned in red thread, the only point of color on her other than her red lips.

She was young. Brienne was startled to think that this woman was as good as married to her Uncle Tywin and playing stepmother to Jaime and Tyrion, though they did not call her ‘stepmother.’

Jaime stepped forward and placed Sansa in Tysha’s arms like a bunch of flowers. Tysha hugged the
little girl convulsively, with the unpracticed eagerness of a woman who regretted having no children of her own. After a moment, Sansa wrapped her arms around Tysha’s neck. “Auntie!” she exclaimed, and Tysha’s big, dark eyes closed with pain. Or ecstasy.

Brienne felt like she was intruding on a private moment, then felt again awash in jealousy at how easy these Lannisters were with her siblings. Even if Tysha wasn’t technically a Lannister. Brienne did not think of herself, Pod and Sansa as half Lannister. They were Tarths and island folk washed up in the city, whereas Lannisters were odd city folk and comfortable in their oddness.

“You three go ahead with Tysha,” Tyrion said in a curiously strangled voice. Brienne felt both relieved and guilty at not being the only one conflicted over the sight of the young woman wearing an old woman’s clothes cuddling her baby sister. “Jaime will bring up your luggage.”

“And what will you bring, dear brother?” Jaime asked archly as they left the shop.

“Why, I shall clap a rhythm for you as you lug suitcases up the stairs,” Tyrion replied, the last word cut off by the clanging of the little bell.

A roaring coal fire burned in the hearth in the small back parlor, and a tea tray was laid out with large mugs of rough china and cream buns, two for every one of them. The furniture was old and heavy, seemingly rooted to the floor. It was a stuffy, cozy room, too hot with the fire going. One wall was covered by a blackboard with ‘Warm welcome to Brienne, Sansa and Pod’ written on it in white chalk, surrounded by flowers drawn in blue and red chalk. Brienne had to swallow a lump when she saw it. This was nothing like her airy island home with the hardwood floors and large windows, but it was wholehearted and sincere.

This was her home now, she reminded herself, as she helped Sansa take off her coat after Tysha ensconced the little girl in the best chair. Pod looked around for a place to put down his model boat so he could take off his coat. Spotting his predicament, Tysha moved some things on the mantelpiece and placed the boat there reverently, like a precious sword, a family relic long lost and now returned. Brienne liked her already for all the trouble she had taken to make them feel welcome and at ease, like they were important, not just orphans thrown on her and her near-as-husband’s mercy.

Jaime and Tyrion came back from disposing of the luggage. Brienne clutched her mug with both hands and watched with unrestrained curiosity. She had never interacted with people who lived in such a cobbled-together family before, and she wanted to see how they would act with each other. Would there be the ease of long acquaintance, the resentment of grown sons toward their father’s much younger woman, maybe even a whiff of impropriety?

Brienne was both relieved and slightly disappointed to see mostly the former. Jaime and Tyrion were completely relaxed around the young, silent woman, treating her more like a sister or a close friend than a potential rival for their father’s affection and legacy. Remembering some of the things they had said at the station and in the taxi, Brienne suspected there was little love lost between Uncle Tywin and his sons. She wondered what Tywin was actually like.

“When is Uncle Tywin coming back?” she asked.

“Tomorrow,” Jaime said, rolling a cigarette. That seemed to exhaust the topic.

He licked the cigarette to make sure the ends of the paper stuck together and went to light it, but Tysha frowned and shook her head at him, gesturing at the children. He made a face, and stuck the cigarette behind his ear rakishly. Tysha nodded, passed him a mug of tea. When she passed Tyrion his, she lingered long enough to stroke his hair quickly before seating herself and taking up her own tea.
Brienne thought this somewhat odd, as Tyrion started a little at her touch, and Tysha made no attempt to touch Jaime in a similar manner. Brienne seemed to be the only person to notice, so she put the odd moment from her mind. She was sitting on a straight-backed chair between Jaime and Tyrion, having surrendered the most comfortable chairs to her brother and sister, and wondered if the way they had sat in the taxi had somehow set things in stone between them, if she would now always have to sit between the brothers, wherever they happened to be.

Jaime ate one of his cream buns, offered Brienne the other one, from his hand, not on a plate as he should have done, as Mrs. Roelle would have insisted he do. Brienne shook her head, only partly because she felt full after having eaten both of her cream buns. “Pod and Sansa could probably eat more,” she murmured, staring into the fire.

They could. Jaime split the bun and gave it to them. “Don’t spoil your supper, now, it’s rabbit pie,” he told the children. “Pie for us, bones for the dog.”

“Dog!” Sansa exclaimed, jumping up in her seat and looking around eagerly.

“Dog?” Pod said thoughtfully. “What kind of dog?”

“A salty old seadog,” Tyrion replied. “Called Mackerel Joe. With an eye patch and a peg in place of his hind left leg.”

“He keeps trying to stand on that peg when he goes for a piss and toppling over,” Jaime added, leaning back in his chair, his long legs stretched out in front of Brienne, his feet toward the fire.

Tysha made faces at them, and Pod looked solemn, like he suspected he was having his leg pulled. Brienne was reassured by the ease with which the brothers spun jokes, like passing a ball back and forth, with Tysha cheering on and refereeing silently from the sidelines. She wondered what part she, Brienne, would play in this ongoing performance which was the Lannisters’ home life. Would she be a fellow mummer? A juggling fool? The one who got hit by balls and oranges and had to fall a lot to elicit laughter? Surely somebody had to be the audience, the one who paid the fiddler and sat solemnly while being mocked.

“They’ve always wanted a dog,” she explained. “But Pap… Father said Sansa was too young, and Pod had his head in the clouds, and I would be gone soon enough, leaving him to care for it.” It did not seem right to call her father ‘Papa’ now that he was dead and Brienne was the head of what remained of her family. “And our housekeeper had a cat. So we never had a dog.”

Jaime nodded, as though she had made a very profound point on the nature of humanity. “Well,” he said, indicating Pod and Sansa with a nod, his words mocking but his tone gentle, “now they have part shares in a dog.”

Soon it was time to see where they would sleep and wash up before supper. Pod had a room to himself, an airy little attic space with an iron bed covered in a patchwork quilt. An eyrie, Brienne thought, that was the right word for it. The window looked out over the roofs of King’s Landing, making the cramped room seem bigger than it was.

“In the daytime, you can see the Red Keep,” Jaime said. They had left Tysha and Tyrion to wash the dishes, and Sansa to keep them company.

“It’s like a crow’s nest on a ship,” Pod said raptly. “But with a bed.”

They left him to enjoy his new perch, and descended one floor. Brienne would share with Sansa, a room overlooking a short alley between towering tenements, a narrow slice of the cobblestoned
square visible at its end. There was a large brass bed for Brienne, with a chamber pot underneath which Brienne instantly vowed never to use or let Sansa use, and a smaller, white-painted cot for Sansa. A single cane-backed chair. A cupboard for their clothes, which smelled of mothballs. A chest of drawers, painted blue. No mirror. The wallpaper had a pattern of big red roses, cabbage roses they were called, and light came from the narrow window and a naked light bulb on the ceiling. It looked like the sort of room Sansa might like, but Brienne was less certain. She was also all alone with Jaime, and though he didn’t say or do anything, she felt uneasy.

Brienne opened her suitcase, pulled out Bear, his tummy bulging with her concealed pajamas, and placed him on the brass bed. A piece of herself to make this room hers.

“A fine bear you’ve got there,” Jaime said obnoxiously. “Aren’t you too old for such toys?”

“I’m sixteen,” she said, and knew instantly that he was right. Her fingers clutched Bear’s shabby fur.

“You’re a big girl. Big for sixteen, big in general.”

Brienne turned to him where he stood leaning against the doorjamb, his arms crossed over his chest, studying her. A golden lion poised for the kill, but she was not his meat.

“Well how old are you?” she demanded, embarrassment and discomfort lending her voice a tremor as of suppressed anger.

Jaime took the cigarette from behind his ear, licked along its length once more to make sure it didn’t spill, and put it in his mouth. Brienne stared at his pink tongue, his lips, looked away as he searched his pockets for matches. “Twenty one,” he muttered.

“Aren’t you too old to still be living in your father’s house?”

His eyes glittered when he looked at her over the lit match, lending him an aspect of something dangerous, coiled and ready to strike, which chose to delay the kill for its own gratification. He smirked at her around the cigarette, tapped ash on the floor as though this were his room, his to do with as he pleased. She hated the way he filled the room with his presence, his smell of turpentine and sweat and tobacco, yet she couldn’t take her eyes off him.

“Why do you wear your hair so short?” he asked.

Brienne was so startled by the change of topic, she brought both hands up to touch her hair, as though warding off a blow.

“I like it this way,” she said defensively.

“Stupid. You should grow it out, hide your face a bit. Though it does bring out your eyes.”

Brienne gaped at him. She knew what she looked like, he did not have to point it out so rudely, so off-handedly, as though it did not even register for him, beautiful even in his unkempt state, that other people might suffer because of their looks every single day of their lives.

Her father had liked her hair long, and she had secretly wished she could cut it very short. She had ruined it when she ruined everything else, in a whirlwind of fury and self-loathing, though now she told herself it was a penance for what she had done, that it was right she should go through life shorn, her shame visible to all.

“Here.” Jaime reached into another pocket, came up with a gap-toothed comb, some of his golden hairs still caught in its teeth. Vain yet slovenly. Brienne could not wrap her head around it. “You
should at least comb it, you look like a seagull nested on your head. And then pecked at it.”

Brienne felt like hurling the chamber pot at his head. He laughed at the tension in her shoulders, the way she squeezed her hands into fists by her sides, but then he ground out his cigarette on the windowsill and gestured to her more gently.

“Come here,” he said, his voice low, warm.

So she went.

He put his hands on her shoulders and inspected her head from several angles, as though it were a lump of clay he was about to sculpt. They were the same height, he had maybe half an inch on her. Brienne didn’t know if this close, silent inspection was meant to impress, scare or reassure her. Her cheeks were burning, and she was trying to breathe discreetly through her mouth, lest the scent of his presence overwhelm her. She had never been so close to a young man before, unless she counted schoolyard fights or swordfighting practice, and then at least there had been swords or fists in between.

When he started to comb her hair, Brienne felt something slip and vanish between them. He was no longer teasing her, winding her up. He smoothed her hair down as a hairdresser might, with esthetic detachment. She felt bitterly offended, and relieved, and offended at her relief.

“There you go, girlie,” he said when he was satisfied with the results.

“My name is Brienne.”

He looked her in the eye, smiled his insolent smile, and stepped back to examine his work better.

“Am I sufficiently presentable for supper at the Lannisters’?” Brienne asked, still smarting from the way he treated her and spoke to her, and then did not treat her and speak to her.

Jaime snorted. “Sure,” he said, turning away, leaving her alone at last. “You’ll be the belle of the fucking ball.”

Chapter End Notes

Hmmm… Jaime Lannister licking a cigarette… Jaime Lannister combing Brienne's hair… Sorry, I wandered off for a minute there. :-P
Supper was served on an oval mahogany table in a small dining room with wallpaper which might once have been yellow or might have been red, but was now mostly brown, giving the room the air of a cave, as though there should be old, wet leaves turning to mulch underfoot and hairy roots hanging from the ceiling, dropping clumps of dirt into the food. The room was so full of furniture there was scarcely any space to move around. Brienne barely managed to squeeze through between the wall and the table, to get to the place setting Tysha indicated was hers. She wondered if she might sit nearer the door in future, even though Jaime also sat at that end of the table.

He ignored Brienne after coming downstairs, as though his combing her hair in her bedroom were a scene invented by her silly, fevered, travel-weary mind, nothing at all to do with him. Brienne still smarted from the last thing he’d said to her. *Belle of the fucking ball.* She was not used to people swearing, yet the expletive itself did not bother her that much. Not nearly as much as Jaime’s mixture of familiarity and mockery, almost fond one minute, cruelly sharp the next. And on such short acquaintance, before Brienne could possibly have given him a reason to want to taunt her so…

Tysha brought in an oval pie dish covered in a thick, golden-brown crust. The delicious smell lured even the dog into making an appearance. It was a white bull terrier with pink eyes and a round black spot over one eye, which did look rather like an eye patch. Brienne glanced at Pod, smiled into her plate to see his look of disappointment at the dog’s lack of a peg leg.

Sansa clapped her hands in delight. “Doggy!” The dog lifted his forepaws onto her chair and licked her bare knee, making her shriek with laughter.

“Does he have a name?” Brienne asked.

“Sometimes,” Tyrion said. He winked at Brienne’s confused expression. “He’s an old dog, knows many tricks, has been called many things in his time. He won’t mind what you call him.”

“Oh.”

The dog abandoned Sansa’s knee in favor of lying under the table, patiently waiting for tidbits. He knew enough to position himself closest to Sansa and Pod, and was thus clearly a very wise dog.

In addition to the rabbit pie, there was warm bread, yellow butter, two kinds of jam, and lots of tea, poured into more big, thick, earthenware mugs. Brienne enjoyed cradling her mug in both hands, warming herself on it, not having to worry about dropping the delicate china Mrs. Roelle had liked to use. Even her big, freckly hands looked somewhat daintier with such heavy-duty crockery in them. At least, this was what Brienne told herself.

They were on their second mugs of tea when the dog scrabbled at the door to be let out. Jaime got up, muttering about bothersome animals.

“Pay him no mind,” Tyrion told the Tarths once Jaime left the room. “We leave the back door ajar. He’s a very self-sufficient beast.” He might have been talking about Jaime as well as Dog, and knew it if the mischievous glint in his eye was any indication.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Brienne asked. “Leaving the door open all night?”

“I suppose,” Tyrion said thoughtfully. “But what isn’t dangerous, in this life?”

Tysha laughed silently, big, soundless whoops, as though what he’d said was the most ingenious bit
of wit ever heard over a supper table. Tyrion smiled at the dark-haired woman, but Brienne couldn’t shake the thought that it was more than just an after-supper joke. *What isn’t dangerous in this life?* she pondered. She couldn’t think of a single thing which might qualify.

There was a blackboard in the dining room, too. Tysha wrote on it: ‘The little one ought to be in bed.’

“I want to work on my boat,” Pod said instantly.

“She means Sansa, Pod,” Brienne explained.

Sansa sat up in her chair and blinked, looking around with exaggerated alertness.

“Oh,” Pod said. “Right. May I be excused?”

“Yes, you may, young sea hound,” Tyrion said.

Brienne observed the nearly parental ease with which Tyrion and Tysha treated Pod and Sansa, experienced an upsurge of that already familiar jealousy. She did not really mind, though. The Lannisters seemed genuinely kind – Jaime less so, but still, there was no overt malice in him that Brienne could detect – and she hadn’t relished the prospect of having to care for all of her siblings’ needs herself. Let Tyrion and Tysha help if they wanted. They would probably do better than Brienne ever could, anyway.

Tysha shook her head emphatically at Brienne’s offer to wash the supper dishes, wrote ‘No chores on your first night’ on the blackboard. She wouldn’t even let Brienne carry Sansa upstairs to bed. Sansa could walk very well on her own, but she liked being babied and fussed over. Brienne decided to follow Tysha’s lead and allow it on their first night.

Tysha and Sansa made a game of undressing, putting on a pink nightdress, combing the little girl’s hair. There was much shrieking and silent laughter. Brienne unpacked her and Sansa’s clothes, feeling excluded, knowing she could join in if she really wanted to. Told herself again she didn’t mind, it wasn’t because she was feeling self-conscious. Jaime’s cigarette stub lay on the windowsill where he’d left it. Brienne threw it out of the window, imagined she was throwing Jaime’s smirking, assessing specter along with it.

‘Sansa is such a beautiful child,’ Tysha wrote on the small pad she carried everywhere in her pocket.

“Yes, she is,” Brienne replied.

‘She’s five?’

“She’ll be six in March.”

‘I am so happy you are all here.’

Brienne couldn’t very well say she’d rather not have been there, given a choice, so she offered the slightly older, much shorter woman a shy smile, and received an enthusiastic, bony hug in return.

‘Good night,’ Tysha mouthed exaggeratedly once she’d released Brienne.

“Good night, Tysha. Will you look in on Pod for me, please?”

Tysha smiled, nodded enthusiastically, as though getting Pod to leave his boats and go to bed were a treat. Brienne felt guilty at palming off her responsibilities on Tysha, but the older girl was clearly
quite adept at being a little mother, and willing to play the part too.

Once she was alone with the sleeping Sansa, in her new bed, Bear clutched to her chest and her face to the wall, Brienne was certain she would weep at last, let the exhaustion and surprises and myriad small shocks of that interminable day and all the days since the night of the apple tree finally pour from her eyes and soak her pillow. Yet no tears came. The sheets smelled clean, Sansa’s breathing was like the distant soughing of the sea, and there was even a hot-water bottle tucked in near Brienne’s feet. She fell asleep feeling more peaceful than she thought she had any right to be.

Her sleep was gossamer-thin and spiderweb-light, shimmering in shades of yellow, green and blue. She awoke in darkness, her calves cramping with sharp growing pains, the hot-water bottle gone cool by her feet, and heard faint music coming from somewhere. A melancholy tune, like bits of the past lost and captured in honey and amber, played on a fiddle and flute. Brienne knew the song, though she could only remember the first line: *I loved a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair.* Why were all the maids in song always beautiful and useless or beautiful and fickle? Yet it was a very beautiful song, sweetly sad, a pleasant ache of the heart. Nobody was singing, they were only playing the music.

Brienne crept out of her new bed with its twanging metal springs, careful not to wake Sansa. The girl was sucking her thumb in her sleep. Brienne pulled it out gently, wondered if Mrs. Roelle had known and done nothing to prevent the bad habit from taking root. She tucked Sansa’s hand under the covers, pulled the blanket up to the little girl’s chin.

Brienne had not brought a bathrobe from Tarth, so she belted her raincoat on over her pajamas, old and too small for her, the cuffs dangling a good three inches above her ankles. She was a castaway, and it was meet that she should have flood ankles.

She crept out onto the landing. The upstairs part of the house was cold and dark, but a light was visible from the kitchen, where Brienne had not yet been, across the hall from the back parlor where they’d drunk tea and eaten cream buns that afternoon.

Brienne went down the stairs slowly, testing each stair for telltale creaks with her bare feet. She tried not to think of the night she had crept through her old house by the light of a harvest moon, yet she could not help remembering it. But the summer was another life. Now it was autumn, cold winds blew in King’s Landing, and she was set on an entirely different course, creeping through a house she could not really call her own, pursuing the source of the music which had woken her.

The kitchen door was closed. Brienne hesitated for several long seconds before she crouched down, feeling huge and ungainly, and peered through the keyhole, the small chink of light blinding her at first, before it resolved itself into a scene from a story or a dream.

The kitchen was bathed in the golden light of a fire. Brienne first saw Dog, sitting on the floor, thumping his tail rhythmically to the music, tongue lolling happily. Brienne felt better to know she was not the only one in the house made to look faintly ridiculous by the music.

She shifted a little, her narrow field of vision moving with her, and beheld Tysha. Her dark hair had been washed and brushed, and hung down her shoulders in voluptuous waves, dark as ebony, close as night. She looked so beautiful by the light of the fire, Brienne’s breath caught at the sight. Tysha held a bone flute to her lips, her eyes closed, focused on drawing those sweet, excruciating notes from the instrument, wordless words she could not speak with her own voice.

Brienne hunted for the fiddle player, found him. Tyrion was standing, his child-sized fiddle a living creature in his hands, his face grave and gentle and fierce. His eyes were closed too. He and Tysha played as one. Brienne swallowed so loudly she was certain they would hear her. They didn’t, of
course, the music filled the world and drowned out the sound of her breathing.

The tune petered out and ended, like water being swallowed up by sand. Tyrion lowered the fiddle and looked at Tysha, who held the flute on her lap and gazed back at him. Some unspoken meaning passed between them, then Tysha grinned, a girlish, playful grin which showed her true age, and started playing a merry jig. After the first few beats, Tyrion returned her grin and picked up the tune, augmenting it, giving it life.

Jaime stepped into Brienne’s field of vision.

She jerked away from the keyhole instinctively before she remembered he could not see her, he had simply gotten up from a chair and stepped into the middle of the floor, between the two players. He bowed, first to Tysha, then to his brother, with none of his brother’s grave courtesy and all of his own languid, mocking ease. He was in shirtsleeves, his firefighter’s jacket discarded. The last wisps of smoke from a just-finished cigarette wound their blue way up from his nostrils, as though he had materialized in a puff of magical smoke, a sleek golden dragon in human form.

Jaime began to dance.

He fulfilled all the promise of his physical grace when he danced, his feet and hands moving in perfect time, his bare, golden-haired wrists the most elegant thing Brienne had ever seen. He smiled a tiny, private smile even as sweat began to gleam on his forehead. Brienne forgot that she was cold and sitting on the stone threshold behind a closed door in a house full of night. Her heart beat in time with the music, with Jaime’s movements, and her hands felt damp as she watched. Tyrion and Tysha nodded their heads in rhythm, in encouragement, smiling at each other, while Dog beat time with his tail, and Jaime seemed to dance for himself, the sole spinning point of a still universe.

Brienne experienced a momentary, gut-piercing stab of desire. She wanted to get up, open the door and join them, see if Jaime would teach her the steps and let her dance with him, if Tyrion and Tysha would play for her too. Then the desire passed and was replaced by safer certainties: the knowledge of her size and clumsiness, the awareness that she had left her broken sword on Tarth, the only object which had lent her movements grace, broken by her own hand while she raged in her father’s room. The certainty that this was not her home or her family, and she did not deserve acceptance or warmth.

She watched the two blond men and the dark-haired woman and their happy, musical dog at their leisure, and wondered if they ever played and danced like this when Uncle Tywin was at home, or if this was something Jaime, Tyrion and Tysha knew they should not do, but did it anyway when they could steal a few hours, the balance of the world be damned. Brienne’s rump went numb on the cold floor and her feet were blocks of ice, but her chest and neck and face were warmed by the music and the sight of Jaime dancing.

Eventually she must have slept, for in her dreams she was curled up on a cold, hard surface when a spill of golden light washed over her, replaced at once by a long, dark shadow.

“What is this creature doing on the doorstep?” a deep voice demanded with the authority of those who expected obedience from others.

“Poor girl,” another voice, kinder and younger, murmured. “She should have come in.”

“Must I tell you to wake her? She should sleep with the dog if she is so fond of floors,” the first voice rumbled.

“I’ll take her up to bed,” a third voice cut in, a lilt of wry amusement in it as well as a faint echo of
concern. “She’s had a long day.”

Try as she might (and she did try, many times), Brienne could never recall any more of that dream. Sometimes she was certain she had felt strong arms, one around her torso, the other under her knees, a heartbeat growing labored under her cheek, a voice muttering “You weigh a fucking ton, you bloody cow” somewhere above her, breath ruffling her short hair. But she suspected she had imagined that part. Dreams could feel very real while they lasted, but they were just fog blown away on the morning wind. Everybody knew that.
Brienne knew at once something was wrong. She lay surrounded by crimson roses amidst glossy green leaves and very sharp thorns, yet she was no fairytale princess to dream for a hundred years while a deadly hedge grew around her, and princes threw their lives away for a chance to kiss her lips.

She blinked, and realized that she was looking at her new wallpaper with its pattern of fat roses, though she had not noticed the very realistic-looking thorns before. She wondered where one purchased such wallpaper, and ran her fingers experimentally down the wall near her head, to verify its smoothness, the illusory nature of the thorns. Nothing there which could hurt her. Sansa slept on her stomach in her cot across the room, her thumb hovering perilously close to her pink rosebud of a mouth, and Bear felt familiar and worn under Brienne’s arm. Thin sunlight poured through the window, filtered through the smoke of many coal fires. City sunlight, coming at an angle between tall buildings or not at all, the sun always just glimpsed through veils of pollution and cloud, more grey than yellow.

It seemed impossible that only the previous day she and Sansa and Pod had broken their fast in their bright kitchen on Tarth, all yellow and blue, with Myrish tiles on the floor and the blasted apple tree stooping to look in on their repast. Then they had made the longest journey of their young lives, all the way to the capital city, and met their new family and eaten rabbit pie. The day had ended wholly inappropriately, with music and dancing and Brienne spying on it all, scrunched up on the doorstep, her feet turning to ice, all the light and warmth in the world on the other side of the kitchen door. She knew she had not dreamt that part, and realized with a jolt someone must have carried her back to bed.

Jaime. Only he could have hefted her weight and not done himself harm. Tysha was physically frail, and Tyrion was a dwarf. Only Jaime was strong enough.

Brienne was certain she did not have enough blood in her entire body to blush as fiercely as she knew she was blushing. She burrowed under her duvet until it passed. How would she face him now? It had been bad enough before, when he treated her with mocking kindness and swore at her and combed her hair. She imagined herself clutched to his chest, pajamas too small for her, big and heavy and not at all the kind of girl who ever got carried anywhere in stories. He would never let her live it down.

Once her embarrassment ebbed, anger surged up inside her. Brienne did not need or want anyone to carry her! They could have just woken her, she would have been embarrassed either way.

She could not make herself stay angry, though. The Lannisters had been the very soul of welcoming acceptance, each in their own peculiar way. Brienne wanted to resent Jaime, but she knew his carrying her had been a kindness of sorts. Even if he did make fun of her for it, though she was starting to remember he needed very little ammunition in that regard, and Brienne could always provide him with more. If he did not mock her for falling asleep on the floor while spying, he would mock her for her pajamas, her freckles, her very existence. Well, she had held her own well enough the previous night, until he pulled out his comb and used that warm, inviting tone of voice, which was just playing dirty. She simply had to prevent future situations in which he could trick her like that from arising, had to be polite and neutral and keep him at arm’s length, but in a way that would not upset Uncle Tywin or Tyrion or Tysha. It might require some practice, but Brienne had little else
to do in the near future.

She threw off the duvet and stood, instantly assailed by the cold air in the room. Her hot-water bottle had gone stone cold hours earlier, and she did not have any slippers. Or a bathrobe. She put on her running shoes and raincoat instead. She found the raincoat thrown over the cane-backed chair, which meant Jaime must have taken it off her before he pulled the duvet over her. She would not blush thinking about which parts of her he may have touched in the process, either accidentally or deliberately.

The oblique, grey light suggested very early morning. Brienne would have liked dearly to sleep longer, but now she was up there was nothing else for it but to pee and see about getting breakfast started. Maybe if she made tea for everyone that would make up for her intrusion into the Lannisters’ privacy a bit. If they rose early, of course, otherwise mugs of cold tea on the table would count only as extra dishes which needed washing. She decided to wait until she heard someone else stir, then put the kettle on.

But first: the bathroom. Knowing where it was in the house made Brienne feel somewhat less like a stranger, an intruder. An orphan. She had been too tired to wash before going to bed, and had only used the downstairs lavatory. Now, she explored one of the Lannister house’s two hearts, the other being the kitchen she had glimpsed through a keyhole, bathed in music and warm yellow light.

The bathroom was cold and silent as the grave. There was a crack in the washbasin, a long dark hair caught in it like seaweed. Brienne plucked it out, waited for over a minute with her hand under the running tap, but the water remained frigid. She wondered if there was some trick to getting the hot water running, washed her face with bracingly cold water, telling herself it was just like washing in a mountain stream.

Four toothbrushes – pink, blue, green and yellow (how did Tyrion reach that far?) – squatted in a jam jar on the shelf beneath the ancient, green-speckled mirror. It made Brienne look like a drowned woman, glimpsed beneath the surface of a lily pad-strewn pond. She averted her eyes from her own reflection, as she had grown used to doing since her father’s death. The bathtub did not have a showerhead, just taps. It was of a variety Brienne had only ever seen in pictures, with four feet shaped like lion’s paws set so resolutely on the tiled floor the tub looked immovable and majestic and vaguely ridiculous. It may have always existed, and the house been built around it, the layout adjusted to accommodate its augustness. It reminded Brienne of another thing only seen in pictures: the Iron Throne of the old kings of Westeros. That too bristled with useless, ornate metal. The comparison made her giggle and feel a little better about the state of the bathroom and her own soul.

Washing her hands after she used the toilet and avoiding her own eye in the mirror, she spotted the most extraordinary object in the room. A set of false teeth floated in a glass next to the toothbrushes, a manic, faceless grin with gums of a garish, sunset pink. Brienne thought of Tysha’s warm smile, Tyrion’s kindly grin, Jaime’s self-assured smirk. Quite apart from the hostility of the false teeth, the Lannisters she had already met were all far too young to require such an object.

Uncle Tywin was home.

Brienne vaguely remembered a harsh voice speaking over her in the cold darkness of sleep, like a voice from beyond the grave, wondered what he would be like and what she might do to make him like her, not so much for her own sake, but so that he would be kind to Pod and Sansa. Perhaps making tea for everyone was not such a bad idea after all.

After the novel experience of exploring the bathroom like a domain of jungles and bogs, the bedroom felt almost familiar, cozy. It was still bitterly cold, though. Brienne wondered what the house would be like come winter, if it was like this in September. She pulled on the first warm
clothes she found: her black corduroy trousers and chocolate-brown sweater Father had brought her from a lecture tour of the North just before last Winter’s Eve. He had bought it too big, so Brienne could grow into it. This habit of his, to buy all her clothes too big, used to annoy her, but she felt grateful for it now, comforted by the familiarity of the garment and how well it had grown to fit her. Or she had grown to fit it.

The view out of the bedroom window was not promising. All Brienne saw was grey sky and brick tenements and a single tree with scraggly leaves clinging to its branches, pathetic rather than defiant. Much like her clinging to old clothes and toys. She set her mouth stubbornly, made her bed quickly and quietly so as not to wake Sansa, placed Bear on her pillow, constant and immovable as that claw-footed bathtub, then slipped out of the room and went downstairs into the kitchen.

The house was so quiet it may have been empty, save for Brienne, yet it had none of the forbidden, pregnant air it had had at night. It was just a strange house in the early morning, sunlight coming in through the tall, narrow windows, thin and murky as ditchwater. The more quickly Brienne learned to navigate it, learned its domestic geography and how everything worked and where everyone fit together, the safer she would be, the better able to keep Sansa and Pod safe. She suspected her siblings would start calling this house ‘home’ out of convenience and forgetfulness and a lack of something else to call it, but Brienne would not. She would call it ‘Uncle Tywin’s house’ and treat it with the respect and wariness due to strange, possibly dangerous territory, even if its inhabitants seemed nice enough and shared rabbit pie with the Tarths their first night there.

Like most of the downstairs rooms, the kitchen was full of dark colors and heavy furniture. There was a large table covered in a tablecloth with big orange flowers splashed over a brown background, very useful for spilling things on, no doubt. The sink was made of stone and heaped full of dirty dishes. There was another blackboard by the window, a cupboard with rows of cheerfully painted plates, possibly Tysha’s modest hobby, and a gas stove as well as a fireplace, which explained the firelight Brienne had seen bathing Tyrion and Tysha like warm applause while they played, glistening in the sweat on Jaime’s face while he danced.

A painting hung over the fireplace, and it was the brightest object in the room, even in the poor sunlight. It showed the white bull terrier known as Dog, painted so precisely, so meticulously, his every hair could be discerned, his nose rough and wet, his eyes alive, as though he might sniff Brienne’s fingers if she touched the canvas. He held a basket full of pink daisies in his mouth, and stood against a seascape background: hilly land and blue waves capped in white froth, with an orange and pink sunset behind.

It was like being back on Tarth on a particularly fine, windy, late-spring evening, in the company of a dog which had probably never been farther than Blackwater Bay, if that. Brienne marveled at the artist’s skill and patience, and felt uncomfortably like she was standing on the headland on Tarth, gazing out to sea, watching for the metal glimmer of her father’s airship returning safely from Essos, while grinning Jaime, kind Tysha and Tyrion, scowling Uncle Tywin with his blurry face stood and watched beside her. The two worlds collided in Brienne’s head, and she felt dizzy.

Looking around for something to do, something tangible on which she could rest her hands and steady herself, she noticed two earthenware bowls sitting on the floor by the stove, one full of water, the other empty. Dog was nowhere to be seen, but Brienne changed his water anyway. Then she set about making tea, filling the large black kettle to the brim, even though she only took down one mug. She could always make more later, if anyone else came down.

As though in response to her line of reasoning, she heard footsteps on the stairs. She stood stock still, a fawn hearing hunters in the greenwood, and listened. The footsteps went past the kitchen, only to return a handful of heartbeats later. Long strides, which knew what they were about, accompanied
by clicking claws. Brienne reached for another mug, certain this was her Uncle Tywin, come home late and underslept and wanting his morning tea, and what better way to leave a good first impression than to show foresight in making it for him.

The kitchen door opened to reveal Jaime, his arms full of milk bottles, and Dog.

Brienne froze, her hand nearly touching the clean mugs ranged on a shelf by the stove, saw him look at her hand suspended between taking down another mug and pretending she wasn’t going to take down another mug. She took one down, since his lip was already curling in a smirk. This round she could not win, no matter what she did.

“Morning,” he said with wholly unnecessary irony, putting the bottles down on the table. Dog went straight for his water bowl, lapped thirstily.

Jaime was barefoot, and wore his ancient corduroy trousers and a pajama jacket unbuttoned all the way down the front. Brienne did not want to see his chest and stomach, the pale, smooth skin, the nipples, tender as a girl’s in the cold air, tufted with hair of a darker gold than the hair on his head, his chin. She turned her back on him, her face and neck burning, and waved vaguely in the direction of the simmering kettle.

“I hope this is all right,” she muttered, hating how insecure and apologetic she sounded.

“I take mine strong, two sugars,” was all the response she got. The words spoken so easily, as though she were his maid, or his wife, someone to whom he need not say ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’

Brienne turned back to face him, reddening with rage as well as embarrassment, pleased to find herself nearly undaunted by the sight of his naked chest, his hand scratching the back of his head sleepily, etching his ribs in paleness and shadow.

“You can make your own tea,” she spat.

Jaime grinned at her, not the least bit discomposed. “That’s gratitude for you, after I carried you up to your bed last night. You should have seen yourself, curled up behind the door like love locked out.”

Brienne folded her arms across her chest, a bulwark against him. “You could have woken me. I only came to listen to the music.”

“Not to watch me dance?”

She glared. She would not give him an inch of satisfaction or thank him for carrying her to bed. A nicer person would have woken her and then pretended nothing embarrassing had happened. A decent person would not stand there half naked and leer at her like they shared a secret. Like he had power over her.

“Don’t you get tired,” she asked frostily, “acting nice one minute and nasty the next? People have baited me all my life. You will not get a rise out of me.”

“Oh, I think I might, if I cared enough to try.” He winked at her, his smile equal parts insolent and playful. Did he ever not smile? “Besides, it’s your own fault for thinking I’m nice. You’ll soon learn better.”

That did not sound like a taunt or a barb. It sounded like a confession he barely knew he was making. Brienne turned away again, confused and disturbed in her decision to stay angry. She was pouring water into her mug (her mug only) when next he spoke, and what he said nearly made her drop the kettle on her foot.
“Think I’m mocking you if you will, but you should take those off.”

She gaped at him, disbelieving her ears. He eyed her legs, arched an eyebrow. “My father cannot stand to see a woman in trousers. He’s been known to chase away paying customers as shameless harlots if they dare enter the shop while betrousered. ‘A sin against nature.’ His words, not mine. Mind you, when he sees your face and that hair he might mistake you for a boy and leave you alone, but I wouldn’t count on that lasting.”

He was making fun of her again, she knew it. She had worn trousers for the journey from Tarth, and to tea in the parlor, and to supper, and nobody had said a peep. “But… But I’m proper. These are proper, decent clothes!”

Jaime shrugged, came up to the stove to make his tea. Brienne moved away from him jerkily, not wanting him so near.

“Suit yourself. If he throws you out into the street, don’t say I wasn’t nice enough to warn you.”

Had Brienne been any less flabbergasted by this insight into her uncle’s character, she might have derived some small pleasure from the knowledge that her words had stung Jaime, despite his pretending otherwise.

“I hate wearing skirts,” Brienne muttered. “I only have the skirt from my old school uniform, and I hate it.”

“I dare say you’ll hate spreading your legs for a meal and a place to sleep after he turns you out even more.” Jaime looked at her, stirred his tea, his gaze cool, assessing. “Unless you have skills and money you never mentioned because you like living here so much.”

Brienne wondered if he was winding her up, just to get her to wear a skirt and make her uncomfortable. Although he couldn’t have known how much she loathed skirts until she mentioned it. She had never been around unloving families before, and was beginning to understand that the face the Lannisters had shown her the previous day was their hidden face, the ‘Uncle Tywin is away so the kittens do play’ face.

She looked at Jaime as he stood by the stove, leaning his hip on it, drinking tea with evident pleasure. “You don’t like him,” she said. A statement, not a question. Jaime looked at her over his mug, kept swallowing tea. She wanted to say You’re scared of him, but instead she said: “You don’t love him either.”

Jaime drained his mug, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, gave Brienne a feral grin. “And the sun rises in the east, and Dornish women taste like fish pie. Any other blazing insights you’d like to share with me this fine morning? No? Then stop yammering and go change.”

She considered telling him he didn’t get to tell her what to do, that he didn’t have to use bad words and make insinuations all the time, that he should button up his pajamas and put on some shoes because the kitchen was cold. She remembered her desire to make a good first impression, decided this might be a better way to do it than making tea. She might listen and watch for clues from people who knew Uncle Tywin best, even if they couldn’t offer her advice without couching it in insults.

“Is there anything else I should know about him?” she asked politely.

Jaime eyed her a moment, as though trying to decide if she was giving him lip. “Lots of things. Speak when spoken to. The rest will come to you eventually.”

“Yes,” Brienne said, her eyes trained on the clean blackboard by the window. “He likes everyone
quiet and in their proper place, doesn’t he?”

The look Jaime gave her was the same one Brienne had seen when they met at the train station, and in the taxi when he spoke of his mother’s death, and in the shop when she made the point about writing being the same as talking. He was weighing and measuring her, and not finding her wanting. Not yet, at least.

She went upstairs to change into a skirt.

Chapter End Notes

I filched the title of this chapter from the eponymous short story by Colum McCann.
Brienne felt mutinous as she rummaged to the very bottom of the pile of thick trousers, summer slacks and shorts in the cupboard, to where the grey pleated skirt lay, squashed and unloved. She told herself she was erring on the side of caution in donning it, but it still felt like a betrayal of herself. Also, a part of her still suspected Jaime was making her do this for his own private amusement.

The skirt was one for schoolgirls, innocent and swirly. Brienne had only kept it out of a vague notion her new school in King’s Landing might have a dress code. The standard-size skirt had never been as long on her as her old school’s regulations stipulated, still less so with the height she’d gained during the summer. It hit well above her knees, making her look ridiculous rather than not-innocent. Legs like freckly trees, no waist to speak of, buttocks and thighs better kept thoroughly covered. She loathed the skirt, and thanked whatever god might be listening that the only mirror she had seen in the house so far was the one in the bathroom, which made everything look submerged in brackish water anyway.

Brienne briefly considered finger-combing her hair, squashed that impulse like a slug while memories of combs and green eyes too close for comfort capered around her. She considered waking and dressing Sansa and taking her downstairs, but the idea of sitting in the kitchen with Jaime and a sleepy Sansa, drinking tea and trying to keep polite conversation flowing, was just too much of a ghastly parody of family life for Brienne to stomach. She pulled Sansa’s thumb out of her mouth again, cursing herself and Mrs. Roelle and even her father for not noticing the bad habit sooner, and went back to the kitchen.

Jaime was smoking and leafing through an old newspaper without stopping on anything longer than a headline. At least he had remembered to fill Dog’s empty bowl with something red and brown and mushy. Dog found it delicious. Jaime’s pajama jacket was buttoned.

He looked Brienne up and down quickly, gave a curt nod. She felt almost offended, how he did not bother to leer or pretend he found the skirt an improvement over the trousers, when he had set up the whole situation in a way which guaranteed he would see how even the skin on Brienne’s thighs turned red if she got sufficiently embarrassed. She stood in the kitchen door, fuming, cold where the skirt left her legs bare. She remembered what Jaime had told her about his age. He would have been three or four at the time of Brienne’s parents’ wedding.

“May I ask you something?” she said. He looked up neutrally. “Do you remember my mother?”

“No. Why?”

A knot of pain was lodged in one of Brienne’s calves, from the spasm which had woken her in the night. She longed to rub it, wouldn’t touch her bare flesh in front of Jaime. “I was just wondering… if you remembered her. Or my father.”

Jaime shook his head. “Father went to their wedding, but he left us here. He always says the ceremony was a travesty, and he did not wish his family to witness it.” He grinned, wolf-like. “My father’s idea of tender care.”

“How old were you?”
“Three, I think. Yes, three. Mother was pregnant with Tyrion.”

“Oh.” The topic seemed closed. For all that he talked a lot, Jaime had a way of shutting down conversations, she’d noticed, like he was always building barricades made of words to prevent other words getting through. “I think my mother was scared of him. Your father, I mean, not Tyrion. I saw the wedding photograph, and Uncle Tywin looked blank with fury.”

“She got away from him.”

Brienne frowned. “You’re making it sound like she was his captive.”

“I am, aren’t I?” Jaime said, archly yet calmly, as though he could only communicate in cryptic irony. Like his every utterance was a message in a bottle, written in code and cast to the fortunes of the sea. He leaned back in his chair and squinted at Brienne as he took a puff, his throat showing long and fuzzy with golden stubble.

“He sent me a jack-in-the-box once,” Brienne said slowly, unaware that she was staring. “It terrified me. He’d made it to look like me, but… worse.” She waited for a barb about her looks; none came. “He’d never even seen me, yet he made this… thing, which looked like me, but horrifying.”

Jaime tapped ash into his empty mug. “The stuff in the shop, the dolls and hobbyhorses and music boxes, that’s just to put food on the table. He makes other things for himself, things that are not for sale. Mechanisms, masks, puppets for his theatre. He’s a true artist, and he knows it.” Again that crooked grin. “And I’m the sorcerer’s apprentice. I paint the toys, the puppets, the scenery.”

“For the… puppet theatre?”

“His true life’s vocation: making puppets dance.”

“You painted Dog.” He nodded slowly, watching her, as wary of the possibility of criticism as of praise. “It’s a very good painting.”

Jaime shrugged, though Brienne could tell he was pleased. “A dog is a dog is a dog.”

Indifferent to being the topic of conversation, Dog finished his breakfast and plopped down on the floor by the stove with a sigh of canine satisfaction.

Jaime took one last drag on his cigarette, dropped it into his mug just as it started to smolder against his fingers, and stood up in one graceful movement, making Brienne feel lumpy and log-like where she stood in the doorway. “Come on,” he said. “I’ll show you around before everyone else wakes. He doesn’t like people snooping.”

He started out of the kitchen like he would leave without checking whether she followed, like it was all the same to him, but just as he drew level with Brienne he reached out as though to take her hand. Brienne jerked her hand away, earning a sardonic twist of Jaime’s lips. She followed, red-faced, infuriated by how even the faint fug of tobacco he left in his wake did not disgust her as much as it should.

The shop was only marginally brighter by day, people moving in the square outside like mechanical toys displayed in the window.

“Let’s start with something simple,” Jaime said, gesturing at the wall of cubbies behind the counter grandly yet lazily, like a master of ceremonies who really couldn’t be bothered. He pulled out a cardboard box, one of many.
Inside was a small dais with two monkeys covered in what looked like real fur standing on it. One monkey wore a tiny, pin-striped suit and held a fiddle no bigger than the nail on Brienne’s thumb. The other monkey had a flute and wore a black dress. Brienne felt a twinge of foreboding. Jaime turned a key, and the monkeys started to move their instruments jerkily, a tinny version of the jig to which he had danced in the night issuing from the box. Eventually the mechanism ground down and the monkeys stopped moving.

Brienne stared at the musical monkeys as though they might bite her, not daring to check what expression might be flitting across Jaime's face. She knew a test when she saw one, and she did not like this one.

“Small children tend to like it,” Jaime said blandly. “Now for something romantic.”

The next box he put on the counter revealed a white rose as large as Brienne’s fist. Brienne started away from it, swallowing convulsively.

“What’s the matter?” Jaime frowned at her.

“Nothing. Just… it’s a white rose.”

“Again with the obvious observations.”

She watched in trepidation as he turned the key, barely daring to breathe. The petals of the rose (stiffened canvas? carved wood? soft ivory?) peeled back to reveal a tiny ballerina with red hair and impossibly long, thin legs. She executed a few careful steps, a perfect plié, and was folded back into the rose to tinkling music.

“It’s ingenious,” Brienne breathed, still a bit fearful yet impressed in spite of herself.

“It’s fatuous but it sells. This one’s better. This was my original design.”

Brienne prepared to feign being impressed after the way he said ‘original design.’ The toy he produced was a small brown bear with a red bow around its neck, which rode a bicycle and rang the tiny bell with its soft paw. It swerved down the counter, ringing merrily, and fell off. Brienne caught it before it could smash on the floor, upside down, bicycle wheels spinning more and more slowly, the bell still ringing. She laughed in joyous surprise.

“Good reflexes.” Jaime sounded genuinely admiring. “So you can smile.”

Brienne bit her lip to stop herself laughing. Jaime took the bear from her hands, his fingers brushing hers. She snatched her hands away again. Why did he keep touching her without really touching her?

Jaime packed the cycling bear away, giving no indication he even noticed Brienne’s blush or her hands not knowing what to do with themselves. She longed for trouser pockets. “You can see the stuff in the shop any time,” he said. “Let’s go to the workroom.”

The workroom was down a flight of stairs behind a door hidden in a particularly dark corner of the shop. Brienne hesitated at the top step, uncertain whether she wanted to go into a dark basement alone with Jaime. But then he switched on the light, and the explosion of colors and shapes she glimpsed drew her down to join him.

The room ran the entire length of the house. The clean smell of sawn wood and the sharp tangs of paint and turpentine filled the air. Wood shavings crunched underfoot. One wall was lined by a bench covered in a grisly array of wooden limbs and doll heads. A paint-spattered bench matched it
along the opposite wall. There was a cuckoo clock above the door, shaped like a green forest cottage with twining purple ivy carved around its roof. The walls were hung with jumping jacks, clowns, bears, ballerinas, kings and queens. And puppets, some as tall as Jaime and Brienne, their identities less easy to guess. Some were complete, perfect, in elaborate costumes and wigs. Others had blank eyes or no mouths, missed limbs or clothes or hair. A few had wigs of very real-looking black hair, but no faces at all, just smooth ovals. There were masks as well, masks to terrify and bamboozle, enchant and seduce.

The room was a murderer’s heaven, an artist’s paradise. Brienne was reminded of cuts of meat and rows of sausages in a butcher’s shop. Only with silk costumes and wigs that looked like real human hair. She twisted her hands into a knot in front of her, fascinated and repelled.

The far end of the room was taken up by a box-like structure hidden behind red plush curtains. The puppet theatre. It was large enough for human performers, though hemmed in by walls and dismembered dolls.

“His heart’s darling,” Jaime said. “Sometimes, when he’s feeling especially magnanimous, he lets me work the puppets’ strings. Can you imagine that?” His voice dripped with sarcasm and something curiously like self-recrimination.

“Don’t!” Brienne exclaimed when Jaime moved to open the red curtains. “I just… It’s too much. I don’t want to see any more. Not right now.”

She looked down so as not to have to see his frown, the question in his eyes. She felt like a baby, frightened of a few puppets. There was sawdust on her shoes, and her legs were pale with cold. The room was bright with electric light and splashes of wild color, but Brienne was all alone with the endless night, a stupid girl wearing borrowed clothes, a stolen life, who ruined everything. She did not want to cry. Tears dripped out of her eyes and fell on the floor, tiny round spots of darkness.

“Brienne.”

She could not bear Jaime being concerned for her, squeezed her hands into fists so her blunt nails dug into her palms. He was mocking and cruel, and she did not deserve concern. Or kindness.

“Brienne, look at me.” He clapped his hands, once, sharp as a gunshot. “Look at me, you stupid cow!”

She drew breath to call him every bad word she had ever heard, but when she lifted her head, mouth already twisting with vile names, tears spilling down her cheeks, fists poised to fight, Jaime launched himself down the long room in a series of cartwheels, his arms and legs a blur, his golden hair sparking like firecrackers on a wheel. He landed in front of Brienne, standing on his hands, kicked his heels in the air, the pajama jacket falling over his neck and chin, revealing the startling textures of his torso. He should have looked like a trained monkey, but he looked more like a dancer trying out a new set of steps, ones which involved the use of arms as well as legs.

“Laugh, Brienne. Laugh at me,” he said, a little out of breath, but he was not laughable. He was beautiful, even upside down.

“I want to go home,” Brienne said, miserable and bleak as midwinter. “I want my father.”

All the tears she had bottled up since the night of the apple tree came spilling out of her. She did not have a handkerchief and did not want to wipe her nose on her sleeve, so she folded down to the floor, uncaring if she was showing too much leg, and buried her face in her hands. She looked especially hideous when she cried, she always had. She heaved loud sobs, inhaled liquidly. She
heard Jaime right himself, his bare feet thumping dully against the floorboards, did not realize he had sat on the floor in front of her until he spoke.

“Our mother died giving birth to Tyrion,” he said quietly, conversationally. Brienne swallowed her sobs to hear him. “He tore her up coming out. So Father hated him right from the start, and he hated me too. You’ve heard Tyrion play, he should be touring, roses strewn at his feet. Father never allowed it. Sometimes he drops hints about leaving me the shop, but he only lets me paint things, doesn’t trust me with a chisel. Maybe he fears I might try carving him up with it.”

Brienne looked up over her wet fingers, her eyes salty pools. “But you don’t hate Tyrion,” she said into her hands.

Jaime half smiled. “People die.” He sat on the floor cross-legged, his arms hanging loose over his knees. He was close enough that a flick of his wrist would have allowed him to touch Brienne’s bare knee.

She went over what he had said in her head. “Why should your father hate you?”

Jaime’s face did not change, except that his nostrils flared as he inhaled, and his eyes grew dull, winter pools covered by a thick crust of green ice. He might kiss me, Brienne thought out of nowhere. I might kiss him. Not that she expected it to actually happen. It just seemed physically possible in that moment.

The cuckoo clock whirred and sounded eight times.

Brienne was so startled she scrambled up to look at it. Instead of a cuckoo, a tiny wolf emerged from the green cottage, but its voice was that of the bird. When it was done cuckooing, a thumb-sized hunter with a yellow beard and a red hat came out of the cottage, slew the wolf and dragged its carcass back inside. The green carven doors closed behind them.

“We’d better go,” Jaime said, standing up behind her. “He hates tardiness.”

Brienne’s hands were still wet with tears but her mouth was dry as she gaped up at the horrible clock. If it was meant as a joke, she did not want to know the punch line. She brushed sawdust off the back of her skirt nervously, followed Jaime up the stairs, into the dim shop and the hallway leading to the back parlor and the kitchen. She knew with a newborn certainty that she would hate her uncle, no matter how he acted or what he said.

Tywin Lannister stood in the hallway in front of the kitchen, tall and gaunt and backlit by the sunlight of a city morning like a demon in a particularly dim hell. His hair was dull yellow and thinning on top, though he made up for it with luxuriant sideburns.

“You are late, and improperly dressed,” he said in a low voice which hummed with menace. Brienne knew at once that if she ever heard this man shout, the world would end. “Do I keep a boarding house for your convenience?”

Jaime snatched his firefighter’s jacket from the coat stand in the hall, shrugged it on over his pajama jacket. “No, sir,” he said dully.

His back and shoulders were relaxed yet wary as he approached the kitchen. Brienne saw why when Tywin lifted his hand faster than she would have thought possible, and aimed a hard, open-handed blow at his son’s shoulder. Jaime twisted aside as though anticipating the next step in a dance he knew well. The slipstream produced by Tywin’s hand on the downward slope of the blow lifted Jaime’s jacket and pajamas, and Brienne glimpsed a days-old bruise on his back, just over his left
kidney. A day when he had not managed to dodge well enough, a man grown suffering blows from his father like an errant schoolboy.

Jaime turned his head and looked at Brienne. “What the eye doesn’t see,” he said with a brilliant, false smile, then ducked into the kitchen. He knew she had seen his bruise, his shame.

Uncle Tywin fixed Brienne with a baleful look. “The next time you are late for a meal in this house, you will go hungry. Is that clear, girl?”

Brienne’s hands hurt because she was clenching them so hard. This man was family and had taken her and her siblings in, but if he tried to hit Jaime again, if he ever tried to hit Sansa or Pod, Brienne would do something unforgivable. Then they would all be homeless as well as orphans.

She made her hands relax, fingers protesting. Her uncle was the same height as his older son, and Brienne could look him straight in the eye.

“My name is Brienne,” she said. She kept such a tight rein on her voice it came out completely monotonous, a doll’s voice. Her hands were trembling.

Uncle Tywin was unimpressed. “Your name is whatever I see fit to call you.”

He left her to make her choice: stay outside and go hungry or come in and eat under his scrutiny. She almost stayed where she was, but her stomach growled, and she had to make sure everyone was all right. My name is Brienne, she repeated silently before she stepped into the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun! Tywin in da house!
Brienne never found out why breakfast was served in the kitchen, an arbitrary exception to the rule that all meals in the Lannister house had to be eaten in the musty, crowded dining room. She figured out very quickly that the relaxed, leisurely tea and cream buns consumed in the back parlor upon their arrival from the train station was something that simply was not done when Uncle Tywin was home. He considered eating in armchairs, off plates resting on one’s knees, scattering crumbs across the carpet and hearth, a sin tantamount to women wearing trousers.

Tywin. Tywin Lannister. Brienne had already resolved not to call his house ‘home’ before she met him, as to do so struck her as the final betrayal of her father. Now she resolved she would not think of him as ‘Uncle Tywin.’ She would call him ‘sir’ to his face, as Jaime had done, and think of him as ‘Tywin Lannister’ in the privacy of her own mind. Tywin Lannister, her mother’s brother who had taken in Anyta Tarth’s orphaned children out of some mysterious impulse which had nothing to do with charity. Who hit his son, and might hit others as well.

Pod and Sansa sat at the kitchen table, combed and dressed and pink-cheeked after being scrubbed with cold water and soap. Brienne admonished herself to make sure Tysha gave her extra chores, as the woman who had met the Tarth children only the previous day had remembered to do everything that needed doing for the little ones of a morning, while Brienne had been too busy being distracted by Jaime and her uncle’s creations and feeling sorry for herself.

There was an empty seat between Pod and Sansa. Tysha waved Brienne into it with a nervous smile, and Brienne thought that she must have gotten Pod and Sansa ready out of fear of her near-as-husband as much as her instantaneous infatuation with the children. Still, Brienne owed her. She sat in the empty chair, feeling like a giant in a dollhouse with Pod skinny and solemn on one side, Sansa unusually subdued on the other. Three bowls of porridge cooled in front of them, untouched. Jaime and Tyrion sat across from the Tarths, Tyrion neat as a pin in his striped suit, Jaime a moral lesson in the perils of slovenliness and beauty. He avoided Brienne’s eye, tapped his fingers on the table near his spoon as though wishing for a cigarette.

He may have needed false teeth to eat, but Brienne had already seen enough to know Tywin Lannister’s bite was far, far worse than his bark, which was terrible enough all by itself. Tywin sat at the head of the table, filling up the space around him despite his spare physique, his sideburns like scorching flames, a halo of terror around his head. With his green eyes and strong jaw, his face was Jaime’s face cut up and remolded, craggier, meaner. His hands were fascinating, like old tree roots, gnarled and scarred and discolored with years of work in paint and wood. Brienne could not imagine a child holding Tywin’s hand. All this she registered without turning her head to look at her uncle directly, the habit of a lifetime of cowering and distrust in her surroundings finally paying off. She was glad she sat between Tywin and Sansa, decided to try and snag the seat Pod was in next time, so Pod wouldn’t have to sit directly on Tywin’s left. It would ruin his appetite, if nothing else.

Tysha crouched on a backless stool across from Tywin, not even a proper chair, casting glances at the kettle on the stove as though silently begging it to boil. Tywin ignored his not-wife’s nervousness, picked up his spoon and began to eat his porridge as though he were alone at the table. On his cue, Tyrion started wolfing down his food too, and the Tarths followed a moment later.

Brienne ate slowly despite her hunger, keeping an eye on Pod and Sansa to make sure they ate
enough, and trying to watch Jaime without raising her eyes from her bowl.

Jaime was not eating. He picked up a bottle of golden-brown syrup from the center of the table and started making lacy, intricate patterns on his porridge. Everyone else’s bowls emptied, and he kept drawing on his food, dreamy, absorbed, smirking. Brienne could not catch his eye, to ask him with her eyes and eyebrows what he thought he was doing and did he want to get hit again.

“Jaime.” Tywin’s voice was a distant crack of thunder, muffled yet sudden and terrible. Sansa jolted in her chair, looked around in fear. Brienne smoothed her sister’s hair to keep her calm, keep her close.

Jaime put down the syrup bottle and turned his careless smile on his father. “Yes, sir?” he asked brightly, as though the scene in the hallway had never happened.

“Stop playing with your food.”

“I was just designing. Painting.”

Brienne couldn’t swallow. She rolled a mouthful of porridge around inside her mouth like a wooden cube. Tywin glared at his older son, saying nothing. After a few too-long moments, Jaime picked up his spoon, still grinning. He had more syrup than porridge in front of him by then, but he cleaned his bowl in record time, as though he were shoveling the food into a pocket rather than his mouth. Brienne breathed a touch more easily, darted glances at her siblings, who ate silently, their spoons barely scraping their bowls, so careful were they not to make a sound. Their father had never so much as threatened to beat them, and yet in a quarter of an hour with Tywin Lannister they had learned to behave like battered children: stay small, stay quiet, do not attract attention to yourself. Sansa had spilled a little porridge on her dress and not even noticed.

Brienne met Tysha’s eye and saw white all around the older woman’s irises, eyes like a frightened horse’s. Tysha had a smaller portion of porridge even than Sansa and had eaten hardly any of it, yet Brienne remembered her putting away cream buns with relish the previous day. No wonder she was so skinny, she was too scared of Tywin to eat. Not knowing why she did it, Brienne looked from Tysha to Tyrion, who was staring at the table just past his empty bowl as though ignorant of his father’s looming, mountainous presence on his left.

Tywin’s spoon landed in his empty bowl with a crash as of the earth rending asunder. “Jaime, change plates. Now.”

Jaime stretched like a cat, yawned without covering his mouth, his head thrown back, his bare foot brushing Brienne’s equally bare calf under the table. She jerked her leg away even though she was certain the touch had not been deliberate, for once. Only when he was done stretching did Jaime stand and gather up the bowls, swift and sure as a juggler. Tywin glared at him. As he passed behind his father’s chair Jaime performed a swift, brief, derisive dance, making a face like a hungry demon at the back of his father’s head, stacked bowls wavering dangerously in his hand.

Brienne was the only person at the table watching him, yet he still would not look at her. She knew what he was doing. She had seen Tywin strike him, seen the bruise, seen the truth. This was Jaime reasserting his place in the world, in this household, reassembling himself in the insouciant, rude, charming image he had shown Brienne at the station and in her room and in the workroom. Brienne understood this. She had survived many a long day of schoolyard taunts and spitballs launched at her head in class by withdrawing behind high stone walls of silence and unresponsiveness. She feigned being deaf and dumb; Jaime feigned not caring. She still wished he would just look at her, see that she neither pitied nor hated him. She realized with a start this was true.
Jaime dropped the bowls in the sink with a loud, deliberate clatter, helped Tysha pull plates of bacon and fried bread from the oven, where they’d been kept warm. When he plonked a plate in front of Brienne, she shifted in her chair and brushed his outstretched arm with her shoulder as he briefly leaned over her. She felt a blush coming on, marveled at her own boldness, and was rewarded with a small shudder from Jaime, an indrawn breath. He kept his eyes averted, but she felt better, as though her own recklessness lent her gravitas, the blood blooming in her cheeks grounded her. Under cover of the change of plates, she used the edge of the tablecloth to wipe the spilled porridge off of Sansa’s dress.

Bread and bacon were consumed loudly and wordlessly. As soon as he finished, Tywin pushed his chair back and stood. Looking at none of them, he rapped out: “Jaime, make yourself decent and come downstairs at once. And bring the boy.” The kitchen door slammed behind him.

Sansa had been very brave throughout the meal, but the slamming door was just too much. She burst into tears, loud gasping sobs. Brienne went to hug her, but Tysha got there first. For a moment they eyed each other over Sansa’s head, neither daring to move in and claim the little girl, then Brienne sat back and smiled with a gesture of surrender. Tysha gathered the weeping Sansa into her skinny arms and rocked her, lips parted in a silent croon.

“That’s his quota for the day filled,” Tyrion said with quiet, sad humor. “One child reduced to tears, one family meal rendered indigestible.”

“Until the next meal, at least,” Jaime added, lighting a cigarette, Tysha’s admonishment not to smoke around the children apparently forgotten. He caught Sansa’s eye across the table and winked exaggeratedly. The girl gulped tears and sniffled, but stopped wailing. Brienne wished she had kissed him in the workroom, for this if for nothing else. Then she felt stupid, her kissing Jaime was utterly impossible. A frog could sooner kiss the sun.

“He knows your names,” Tyrion explained gently. “And he doesn’t much care what you look like.”

“What did he mean, ‘bring the boy’?” Brienne asked, remembering Tywin’s words, as a chill of foreboding passed through her.

Tyrion and Tysha exchanged a look. Tysha grabbed a piece of chalk out of her apron pocket and scribbled on the blackboard, still clutching Sansa with her other arm: ‘Pod will learn the craft from your uncle.’

“Pod will learn the craft,” Jaime said slowly, emphasizing Pod’s name like an imprecation. Clearly this information was as new to him as it was to the Tarths.

“Why Pod?” Brienne asked before Jaime could say something horrible. The way his mouth was twisting suggested it would be something unsuited for children’s ears.

“He saw the model boat in the parlor,” Tyrion answered. “Didn’t think much of it, since it came out of a kit.” He addressed the wide-eyed Pod directly. “But he said you know how to work with your hands, and you might learn how to make things yourself.”

“Make my own boats?” Pod said dreamily, already sold on the prospect of spending days in the workroom under Tywin’s tutelage, cutting up his small hands with chisels, risking his uncle’s wrath, his blows.

Brienne opened her mouth to protest, knowing it would be futile. They were all in Tywin’s power.
now. She said nothing because Jaime stood abruptly, with a screech of chair legs against the floor, and left the kitchen, his smoldering cigarette abandoned on his plate. Its blue-grey smoke rose in a slender column and dissipated under the ceiling.

“And what about me and Sansa?” Brienne asked, watching the smoke curl just before it vanished above their heads. “What does he have planned for us?”

Tyrion squirmed uncomfortably. Brienne felt terrible – it wasn’t Tyrion’s fault his father was a monster. “You will stay in the shop with Tysha and learn the ropes. Sansa will stay with you, touch nothing, and keep out of the way. His own words.”

“What about school?”

Another glance passed between Tyrion and Tysha. ‘Too late to start this year,’ Tysha wrote hastily.

A shopgirl. Brienne remembered telling Mrs. Roelle she could leave school, get a job, look after Pod and Sansa herself. That would have been a choice. This was horrid, the choice made for her, her ideas and feelings disregarded and trampled into the dust. Yet what other option did she have? She was in a strange city, had no money, no non-Lannister friends or family left. If she took Pod and Sansa and ran back to Tarth, she would be sent to a young offenders’ institute and the little ones would have to go to a children’s home or be separated and sent to foster families. At least here they had Tysha and Tyrion on their side. And Jaime.

None of them could protect Brienne and her siblings. Tyrion and Tysha and Jaime could not even protect themselves. Well and good. Brienne knew she was not cut out to be a little mother, but maybe she could be a champion, a quiet source of strength to the others. Let them all lean on her, and her life would not be completely wasted.

Brienne looked up at Tysha’s anxious face. “I’ll do the dishes, and come to the shop as soon as I am finished,” she said. “I just need to change into some warmer socks.”

Tysha’s relief was palpable, her smile radiant. Brienne wished she could give her something better to smile about than the reassurance that, for a little while at least, she would not incur Tywin’s wrath.

Brienne exchanged her cotton ankle socks for thick knee socks, and wondered what she would do when true winter came, with the house so cold and her forbidden from wearing trousers. One thing at a time. She could not worry about where to find money for leg warmers when she had to deal with Jaime first.

She heard him splashing in the bathroom, no doubt ‘making himself decent’ with cold water and soap. She knocked.

“Fuck off,” he said.

Brienne wondered if he could make out her shape through the frosted glass on the bathroom door, if he would have spoken differently had he known it to be Tysha or Tyrion. Or the children. She considered trying the door handle, convinced Jaime never bothered to lock himself in, wondered what state of undress she would find him in, and whether he would shout at her or throw the glass which had held his father’s teeth at her or laugh and splash her with cold water.

She crouched down, wondering if he would open the door and find her like that twice in less than a day and a night. There was a key on the inside of the door, but she felt certain he would hear her if she spoke right into the keyhole.

“Jaime, I’m sorry he took Pod on as an apprentice. I don’t know why he did it. I don’t know what he
plans, and if he wants Pod for himself or he just wants to show you up. I need you to look out for Pod. He doesn’t understand, and he’s a good boy, he’ll try to please Tywin. Please look after Pod for me. Please.”

She wondered if she should say something about what she had seen in the hallway, knew even before she finished the thought that she shouldn’t. There was nothing she could say about it that would not make Jaime hate her, and she had just discovered she liked him not hating her.

She waited another moment or three, but when the only reply she received was a leaden silence, she stood and walked downstairs to start in on the pile of dirty dishes. Jaime would look after Pod, and Tysha had already claimed Sansa. Well and good. Brienne did not need to find a place for herself in this house. She had better not, it would make her dull and careless. She would watch, and listen, and learn. And if Tywin tried to hurt anyone, she would do something, even if she did not yet know what.

Chapter End Notes

FYI everyone: I will be traveling for most of the pre-Christmas season, and will have very patchy Internet access. So if the updates on this fic become a bit erratic, that's why. I will endeavor to keep the biweekly schedule going and will keep responding to comments as always, but there might be some delays -- regular transmissions will resume on December 20, when I return from my travels.
Brienne’s first customer was a boy about Pod’s age but much shorter than any child of Selwyn Tarth’s. He was dressed in short pants and knee socks despite the autumn cold, and carried a pile of silver stags and copper stars tied up in a clean handkerchief, probably by his mother. He must have saved for a long time to be able to buy one of Tywin’s masks for the Feast of Old Gods, which was in October, still a few weeks away, but the boy obviously couldn’t wait once he had the money.

Brienne imagined him depriving himself of sweets and books and other toys, cheaper, everyday toys much easier to love and break, in order to buy one of her uncle’s creations. It seemed somehow both admirable and unjustifiable. She helped Tysha by fetching down boxes from the highest cubbies, the ones Tysha couldn’t reach without a stool but Brienne didn’t even have to get up on tiptoe to reach. Together they laid out a wealth of masks in front of the entranced boy: lions, tigers, bears, demons, witches with straw hair.

Brienne suddenly realized that the black, glossy hair she had seen on some of the puppets in the workroom must have come from Tysha’s head. What dreadful patience Tywin had, to wait until her hair was long enough for his needs, for his dolls, chop it off, and then make her grow it out again, and again. Brienne wanted to march straight downstairs and beat her uncle bloody, but she was also relieved those masks and puppets, the private ones, were not for sale. She could not have abided seeing this little boy with scabby knees walk out of the shop with a piece of Tysha in a parcel under his arm, even if it was a dead part, a part which grew back. Brienne fingered her own hair and was grateful it could be of no use to Tywin, dry and short as it was.

The boy tried on an eerily realistic tiger mask and lunged at Tysha across the counter, snarling, his small hands bent into blunt-nailed claws. Tysha pretended to shrink away from him and cower behind Brienne, her face a silent mask of terror but with a smile hovering around her red lips. The boy looked up and up at Brienne, and took off the tiger mark. He frowned. “Are you a girl?” he asked.

“No.” Brienne leaned down slowly till she was eye-level with him. “I am a knight.”

The boy sniffed. “That’s all right, then,” he said in all seriousness. “If you were a big-game hunter, I’d be worried.”

Brienne smiled uncertainly. If this little boy were Jaime, she would know he was winding her up. As it was, she was only half certain the boy was joking, but she did not mind.

Finally the boy counted out his money for an elephant mask with vicious-looking wooden tusks and a trunk which could be raised by pulling on a string. Tysha held out a bolt of brown wrapping paper, but the boy snapped the mask onto his head backwards and left, skipping merrily, the elephant’s trunk bobbing behind him.

‘It is such a pleasure to make children smile,’ Tysha wrote on the pad of paper she kept in the shop, after she had shown Brienne how to sort money into the till.

They had put Sansa behind the counter and given her an old, broken doll to play with. Her handwriting gone all loopy and crooked with embarrassment, Tysha had explained that Tywin
wouldn’t like Sansa playing with any of the toys for sale. Sansa did not seem to mind: the doll was hers and she was absorbed in it, barely paying attention to the boy who had come to buy a mask.

Brienne nodded and smiled at Tysha. She couldn’t think of anything to say to this woman who was so young and obviously so desperate to have children of her own. She wondered if Tysha would like to have children with Tywin, but her mind skittered away from the idea like a frightened mouse. She imagined one of the rooms upstairs must belong to them, that Tywin and Tysha must share a bed, and could not bring herself to picture them doing any of the things she knew married, or near as, people did together. It was even more impossible to envision than Brienne’s (dead) parents making love in their old bed, now sold or chopped up for kindling.

Tyrion came into the shop from behind the brown velvet curtain. He had his fiddle case under his arm, and his shoes shone.

“I’m off, my ladies,” he said, offering Brienne and Tysha one of his not-ironic courtly bows which made him look suave and older than he was. “Don’t wait for me at supper. I’m all the way for River Row, and will get a bowl of brown on the way back.”

Sansa popped up at the sound of Tyrion’s voice. She was too short to see over the counter, so Brienne lifted her onto it. Tyrion offered Sansa a bow as well, and she beamed, kicking her feet over the edge of the counter. She loved Tyrion as easily as she loved her broken doll, her not-aunt Tysha, Jaime who had carried her in his arms and let her drool on his firefighter’s jacket. Brienne wished with all the strength left in her weather-beaten heart that Sansa would not lose that in this dark house, that innocent ability to give and give and not worry what, if anything, she would receive in return.

Tysha scribbled, held the pad up for Brienne to see. ‘Tyrion’s playing at a wedding!!!’

“What do you like doing wedding gigs, Tyrion?” Brienne asked, because he was kind and so she wanted to know more about him.

He grinned, looking startlingly like Jaime for a moment. “Not as much as I’d like having a wedding of my own, and especially what comes after a wedding.”

He was still grinning a little at Brienne’s blush when his eyes slid off her and snagged on Tysha. Even had Brienne not been able to see Tysha’s face, the look Tyrion gave the dark-haired woman was a song, a long and tortured one in which the lovers might or might not meet again at the end, though hope of a reunion remained. Tysha’s face glowed with that hope, a pale wintry light.

Brienne turned away so as not to intrude on their silent communion, felt a small thrill in her stomach. She had not imagined it: Tysha stroking Tyrion’s hair while passing him his tea, Tyrion all but cringing away from her, the way they behaved around Pod and Sansa, almost like parents. None of that was only in Brienne’s head.

Had Tysha sacrificed her body and voice to stay close to Tyrion, or was Tyrion wasting his music and fine manners to stay close to her? Brienne considered whether Tywin knew that his heavy hand had not squashed whatever was between Tysha and Tyrion completely. Surely not even Tywin was all-seeing. He only believed he was.

Brienne wondered if Jaime knew. He must have. He was probably their confidant. Brienne shook her head at her own fancifulness: grinning, mocking, provoking Jaime seemed like the last person anyone would entrust with a secret. He was also the last person to whom Brienne’s thoughts would stray, back on Tarth.

She was not on Tarth. Not now, not ever again. She was the girl who had killed her father, and had
better let go of any silly notions about golden hair and mocking smiles. She shook her head hard to clear it.

“Brienne has a bee in her head!” Sansa exclaimed, trying and failing to wrap her arms around Brienne’s thick waist. Brienne stroked her hair, cupped Sansa’s small head to her stomach gently.

“Are you all right, Brienne?” Tyrion asked, frowning up at her.

“I’m fine. I was just a bit dizzy.”

Tysha’s hand flew over the pad. ‘I’ll make you a cup of tea.’

Tyrion craned his head over the counter – he had to stand on tiptoe to see the pad. He looked conspiratorially at Brienne, nodded at Tysha as though the mute woman couldn’t hear him just fine.

“This one worships at the altar of Pot and Kettle, the great tea goddesses of the Summer Isles. It’s a panacea, tea.”

Tysha swatted at the air above his head playfully, and he folded his hands over his heart as though mortally wounded.

“Pan sea,” Sansa said wisely to Brienne’s stomach, trying the new word out for size, then laughed alongside Tyrion and Tysha.

Brienne smiled. Even when she did not understand them, even when she thought they were being cruel, she appreciated the Lannister brothers’ efforts at humor. Tywin might rule them all with an iron hand, but he had not broken their spirits. Not yet.

Tyrion left. Tysha brought Brienne a mug of strong, sweet tea, wrote that Brienne was in charge while she and Sansa peeled potatoes for their lunch. Nobody else came into the shop, and it was even darker inside than it was outside, where clouds covered the snippet of sky visible above the cobblestoned square. Brienne counted and recounted the money in the till, made sure she had wrapping supplies all laid out and ready, then started pulling down boxes at random, curious and bored.

She wanted to hate the toys she discovered because her uncle had made them, but she couldn’t. Some were spooky, and some were whimsical, and all were breathtaking. Wooden horses with strings so a child could pull them along, painted red and blue and green, splashed with large daisies. Whistles in the shapes of various birds, meticulously executed, each one giving a different hoot or trill. Rattles in the shapes of pot-bellied owls and peacocks and field mice, with dried seeds inside. A lion with articulated paws and snarling jaws, rendered lovable by dint of being only about eight inches tall.

Brienne recognized Jaime’s hand in the blossoming horses, the carefully painted birds, the barely restrained explosions of wild color. His creations were as varied as his smiles. She blew tentatively into one of the whistles and drew forth a sound like a tiny, brown-speckled, orange-breasted sneeze. She wondered if Tyrion helped Tywin modulate the whistles so they produced the different birdcalls. He didn’t seem involved in the toyshop in any way except by being Tywin’s son and living there.

She wondered if Tywin ever hit Tyrion, or if Tywin thought his younger son was being punished enough by being a dwarf and living in this house, his lady love tied to his father by bonds Brienne did not yet fully comprehend.

*Father hated him right from the start, and he hated me too.* Jaime’s words, spoken in the workroom only that morning. Why did Tywin hate Jaime, who was beautiful and graceful and a wonderful
painter? And sometimes cruel and always mocking and slovenly. Himself. Jaime was himself. A son any father would be proud to have. What came first, Brienne wondered, toying with the string on a large, irregularly shaped box: Jaime’s temper, his cutting wit, his insolence, or Tywin’s intractable will, his cold, grinding desire for mastery over the world, over his small world?

She pulled the string and opened the box.

“Oh.”

Inside was Brandon the Shipwright’s ship, the one he had taken on his last journey, across the Sunset Sea. He had brought with him a pair of every animal he could find, in case he landed on some undiscovered, empty shore. He never returned, his journey without end, sailing still, maybe. Like the goal in a dream, the sunset kept moving away from him.

The ship stood as tall as Brienne’s lower arm and hand, and was painted green, with blue waves rendered along its bottom. Separate compartments in the box held Brandon himself, with a shaggy beard which looked like real hair but felt like carven wood, and thirty pairs of animals. The elephants were as long as Brienne’s index finger. The lion and lioness wore crowns. The white mice were so tiny she left them in the box for fear of losing them. Her hands looked huge next to the pairs of tiny, perfect animals, yet the contrast only made the work more exquisite. Brienne set out the pieces on the counter in pairs, Bran at the head of the beasts’ procession, and marveled.

“Pod would love this.”

She looked at the price tag tied around the main mast like an outsized flag. Fifty gold dragons.

“Gods!” Brienne breathed.

“Worth every copper star.”

She started violently. Tywin had climbed the stairs from the workroom without making a sound. She wondered if he had done it deliberately, suspected he had. A lion prowling his territory, on the lookout for intruders. She remembered Jaime telling her his father didn’t like people snooping in the workroom. Tywin’s pale green eyes, flecked with gold, watched her coldly, so Brienne knew she was snooping even in this public part of the house. She was only there on sufferance.

“A fair price,” Tywin said, nodding at the ship. “Now put it away, and mind you don’t break anything. Those aren’t for playing.”

He stood there, watching her, and so of course her fingers shook, and she nearly dropped the lion and nearly snapped the lioness in half.

She was finally, finally retying the string around the box when he spoke, more quietly than before, and even more chillingly. “You’ll have to do better than that if you wish to stay here, girl.”

Tywin did not smile. His lips twitched the tiniest bit over his false teeth, and Brienne struggled with the urge to duck behind the counter and cover her head with her arms.

“Say that to me yet a third time today,” he said, his voice like raw silk, a lion’s roar heard in the distance but still too close for comfort. “See what happens.”

Brienne kept looking at him, but her hands were trembling on the counter and blood was rising in her face, ruining the desired stoic effect. Finally Tywin nodded, satisfied that he had won, and went
through the velvet curtain, toward the kitchen.

Brienne escaped upstairs, locked herself in the bathroom, and splashed her burning face with ice-cold water. When she could breathe without sobbing, she remembered she had left Bran’s ship in its box on the counter and the shop unattended. Cursing herself for letting Tysha down, not even daring to think what Tywin would say, she stormed out of the bathroom and nearly collided with Jaime, who was coming up the stairs.

“Easy!” He grabbed the banister so as not to fall backward. “Watch where you’re bloody well going!”

Brienne grasped for his sleeve blindly, tugged. He all but crashed into her, for she had misjudged and pulled him to her with far too much force. The smell of paint and tobacco was thick in Brienne’s nostrils. They were close enough to kiss or dance, her face radiating heat, her eyes swollen with unshed tears.

“What’s he said to you?” Jaime demanded, low and dangerous, an echo of his father’s lion growl in his voice.

Brienne shook her head, knuckled her eyes. “Um. How’s Pod?”

“He cut his finger with a chisel and is happy as a clam to be carving real wood. ‘Just like a sailboat.’ What happened?”

Brienne shook her head again, stepped around Jaime and headed down the stairs. She was nearly at the bottom when he spoke again.

“I did warn you about him.”

“I know you did. I still had to face him.”

She looked back up and saw Jaime standing in the open door of the room next to hers. The two rooms were on one end of the landing, the bathroom and another bedroom on the other.

“What are you doing there?” she demanded.

He grinned at her, his usual glibness smoothing out his frown, taking away some of the concern and anger from his eyes. “Do I need your permission to go into my own room now, Lady Brienne?”

“That’s your room? Do you have to share too, with Tyrion?”

He shook his head, watching her. “Tyrion sleeps downstairs. Though the only full bathroom is upstairs. It’s hard on his legs, but at least he has his bit of privacy in what used to be a walk-in cupboard behind the parlor.”

“Oh.”

“Am I allowed to enter the hallowed precincts of my sleeping quarters now, oh fair and gracious lady?”

Brienne scowled, even though she also wanted to smile a little. “You are ridiculous. And don’t call me ‘lady.’ Or ‘fair and gracious.’”

“As you wish, girlie. Don’t be late for lunch…”

“… or he’ll throw me out on my ear, I know.”
Brienne walked away, still undecided between scowling and smiling. *Girlie!* And Jaime sleeping in the next room, just a layer of bricks and mortar between them! She wondered which side of the room his bed was on, by the wall they shared or under the window overlooking the square?

She shook her head extra hard to clear it of these thoughts rattling around inside it like dried seeds. After putting away Bran’s ship and locking the shop, she ventured into the dining room to set the table for Tysha.

Chapter End Notes

I invented the Feast of Old Gods as the Westerosi equivalent to Halloween, since I can imagine in the New Gods-worshipping South the Old Gods might eventually be reduced to goblins you can dress up as one night of the year and have people give you candy. And as in *The Magic Toyshop* the ship toy is actually a model of Noah’s Ark, I elaborated the story of Bran the Shipwright a bit, and voila.
A Period of Adjustment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Time passed, as it will, and Brienne adjusted to her new life, or near as.

Sometimes it seemed to her, despite the long journey she had made with her siblings and how different her life was now, that she might as well not be in King’s Landing at all. Brienne would not have been shocked to wake up one morning and find herself again on an island, a small and grey one somewhere off the Northern coast, where everyone knew each other and always asked after each other’s health, even if they had last seen each other not a day and a night before. The cobblestoned square where Tywin Lannister’s toystop squatted among other, more prosaic, better illuminated shops was an island unto itself at the top of its steep hill, surrounded by other islands which together made up the capital of the Seven Kingdoms.

It was nearly November already, almost two months since she left Tarth, and Brienne had not gone much farther than the Gate of the Gods, in the opposite direction from the Great Sept and the Red Keep and other places she still only knew from pictures. Sometimes she glimpsed the Keep through Pod’s window, when the weather was fine and no smog hid it from sight. At that distance, it looked like a child’s hand dipped in blood. The sight made Brienne queasy.

Tywin Lannister kept his family working long hours, and did not believe in paying them wages other than room and board. So Brienne’s life revolved around the small square with its cramped shops, tall, narrow tenements and worn cobblestones, which looked as though the pavement consisted of the petrified teeth of some great herbivore.

Every morning Brienne made a tour of the square with a basket on her arm and a shopping list in her pocket, written in Tysha’s neat, looping handwriting. All the shopkeepers asked politely after Tysha and everyone else, and sent their regards even though it was obvious none of them liked Tywin. Most got used to Brienne quickly enough, and had known who she was ever before they met her. Tysha must have covered several pads of paper telling the Tarth children’s story again and again. Brienne was grateful, as it spared her the awkwardness of initial introductions.

She soon discovered that Mr. Florent who owned the sweetshop was a follower of R’hllor, the eastern fire god Jaime and Tyrion had joked about in the taxi. Mr. Florent asked if they celebrated Bonfire Night on Tarth, so she gathered this was an important holiday for the followers of the Lord of Light. When she confessed she did not know what Bonfire Night was, he merely grinned and said that it would be a sight to see, and Brienne should come back and talk to him if it gave her pause. Brienne resolved to ask Tyrion about Bonfire Night, whether it would be as cozy and lovely as it sounded or as spooky as Mr. Florent made it sound.

Sometimes she took Sansa along on her tour of the shops. On those days the girls would return with a bar of chocolate or a flower, given to them for free by the sweetshop owner or the greengrocer, because Sansa was so pretty and the shopkeepers felt sorry for the Tarths, orphans that they were. Other days Brienne was accompanied by Dog, who knew neither leash nor collar, but trotted along beside her happily enough when he was in the mood or not busy with important doggy business which took him away from the house.

Sansa had taken to calling Dog Daisy because he was white, while Pod called him Bran, after Bran the Shipwright. Tyrion approved, repeating that the dog was old and had had many names in his time. Dog answered to every name or no name, depending on his mood. Brienne still called him
Dog, because it seemed presumptuous to tack a name of her choosing onto the animal, like a price
tag. Also, Jaime never called him anything but Dog, so Brienne didn’t either.

Pod and Sansa had found their places in the Lannister home. It was difficult to tell if they missed
Papa and Tarth, for they never spoke of either. But then, Brienne discovered that she hardly ever
thought of her mother any more. Her mother’s face had finally resolved into a sunny, green-eyed blur
in Brienne’s mind, all individual features gone. Selwyn Tarth’s death overshadowed everything, but
Pod and Sansa were younger, in a new place with new people, and Brienne hoped they were not
suffering like she was.

Pod was absorbed in his apprenticeship under Tywin’s tutelage, and seemed happier than Brienne
had ever seen him, now that his passion for boats had a purpose, even if the purpose was to fill
Tywin’s till. She wondered if that was how it had been for Jaime in the beginning, if Tywin had
treated him with stern patience and occasional kindness when he first started daubing on toys as a
boy. She wondered if (when) the blows would begin. She was still not certain what she would do if
Tywin did get violent. She had not seen him raise a hand to anyone since the first day. If he did hit
Jaime or Pod, it did not happen where Brienne could see or hear, and was not spoken of.

Sansa became a princess in her new home, as she had been in the old one. A lost princess, a princess
reduced to carting around a broken doll and wearing homemade pinafores because Tywin would not
pay for shop-bought clothes since Tysha could sew. Tywin ignored the little girl, who only saw toys
as things to spoil by using them, for which Brienne was grateful. Sansa had adopted all three of the
younger Lannisters, happy to spend her days with Tysha, laughing and cooking and learning
domestic secrets. Brienne had no idea how they communicated so well with nothing but mime and
smiles, since Tysha couldn’t speak and Sansa couldn’t read, but they did not seem to need words.
Their was an instant sympathy, two souls meeting and recognizing each other: the motherless child
and the childless woman.

Sansa dogged Tyrion’s footsteps whenever he was home, delighted that she was set to overtake him
in height, much to Tyrion’s approval. Tyrion also told Sansa better stories than Mrs. Roelle ever had,
for in Tyrion’s stories sometimes the princess was the dragon and saved herself from dire peril. And
Sansa loved Jaime, of course. He was her raggedy prince, handsome and aloof, who sometimes
played with her but mostly let her turn to him in adoration and feed herself on his presence, like a
sunflower. Brienne would have been more concerned by the intensity of Sansa’s attachment if the
feelings Sansa had for Tyrion and Tysha and Pod and her, Brienne, had not been as strong, but they
were subtle shades of the same color, a palette of warm pinks and reds and crimsons.

Brienne would have been more concerned if she hadn’t noticed the same intensity of feeling in her
own breast, though her feelings for the Lannisters were more differentiated than younger, generous
Sansa’s.

Brienne loved Tysha with a warm protectiveness and gratitude. She loved Tyrion with amusement
and deference to his life experience, for in many ways he was the most worldly member of the
family, although Tywin was the master of the house. She loathed Tywin and feared him and knew
she should not be impressed by his iron grip on the household, yet was. And Jaime…

She did not like to think of Jaime too long, for he intruded on her thoughts too much as it was. He
was always around with his firefighter’s jacket, bought in a junk shop as it turned out, no wild tale of
adventure attached to it after all. Jaime’s life revolved around the workroom and the kitchen.
Sometimes he helped Brienne dry and stack dishes of an evening. Sometimes he went out drinking
with Tyrion, though rarely. He did not have a woman so far as Brienne could tell. He treated Brienne
with familiar mockery, occasional cruel wit, and unexpected moments of warmth. Like they shared a
secret, and she supposed they did, but it was not the kind of secret which gave him power over her. It
was the kind of secret which was both painful (*the bruise on his back, his face when she had asked why Tywin hated him on her first morning in the house*) and precious (*his voice after she had nearly knocked him down the stairs, his teasing about her hair and skirts*).

When Tysha realized Brienne only had the one skirt, her old grey one for school, she saved up the change from the housekeeping money Tywin gave her, waited until the first day when Tywin was away on his important toymaker business, and took Brienne on her one and only excursion into the city. They rode a tram to a shop, a tiny cavern of a place near the Gate of the Gods, where more bolts of cloth than Brienne had ever seen lay piled up precariously from the uneven floor to the low ceiling. Tysha used mime to bargain with the shopkeeper, a grinning Myrish woman who clearly knew her, and bought enough material to make three more skirts for Brienne, a paisley one, a dark brown corduroy one for winter, and a blue one. Tysha gestured at her face, then at the blue cloth, and smiled, so Brienne would know the skirt would match her blue eyes. Brienne was just grateful the skirts would cover her knees.

Tysha guessed at once that Brienne would be hopeless as a cook, and put her on permanent dish-washing and shop-helping duty, which suited Brienne fine. Gradually, without anyone willing it to happen, Brienne even took over from Tysha as head shopgirl, which was fine as well as not, since it meant she got to spend long stretches of every day alone with her thoughts. In the evenings she kept Tysha company while the older woman measured cloth and cut and sewed, by hand, for Tywin did not think to buy her a sewing machine, although Tysha made all the costumes for his dolls and puppets, heavy, elaborate things in bright colors and expensive, slithery, iridescent materials. Checked cotton pinafores for Sansa and dresses of purple and cloth of gold for the puppets. Brienne railed against it inside, but what could she do?

Tywin kept Jaime and Pod busy in the workroom most evenings, while Tyrion went out, playing gigs or going to taverns. When he did stay in, he usually sat in the kitchen with the sewing woman and the tall girl. The quiet fondness between him and Tysha was both the sweetest and the most excruciating thing Brienne had ever witnessed. Yet they never made her feel unwanted or like she was intruding, and for that too she was grateful.

Tywin mostly ignored Brienne, though sometimes she felt his pale, gold-flecked eyes on her while she served customers or polished the mahogany counter to remove the smudges left by their fingers. He was still weighing and measuring her, in a manner wholly different from how Jaime had watched her early in their acquaintance. Brienne wondered which outcome would be worse: for Tywin to find her wanting or decide she lived up to whatever obscure criterion of worth he applied to people who did not make magical toys like he did.

Brienne was not reassured by the lull while he measured her. She could feel his presence like the afterimage of lightning on her irises, his essence of thunder, the miasma of barely contained violence he seemed to carry everywhere with him. Had Tywin Lannister been one of the great men of the world, he would have been magnificent. As it was, he was an artist in a field appreciated only as an idle amusement or a folk craft, when it was appreciated at all, and so he became a domestic tyrant, and kept everyone tethered to himself by the shackles of money and obligation and love.

Not love for him, Tywin. The love other members of his household had for each other.

Brienne understood this the day she got her first monthlies since the move to King’s Landing, and came to Tysha, blushing and mumbling about needing clean rags for a pad. Tysha took Brienne up to the sparsely furnished room she shared with Tywin, a room better fit for a septon than for a couple. There wasn’t even a blackboard for Tysha to write on, and the wall the room shared with the bathroom seemed to emanate damp cold. Tysha made Brienne sit on the bed while she rummaged in her cupboard for suitable rags. Brienne felt like she was trespassing, like she might be irrevocably
stained if she sat on Tywin’s side of the bed, so she sat on Tysha’s side, on the very edge of the hard mattress, and stared at her feet. It wasn’t until Tysha handed her a bundle of rags, far too many for one turn of the moon, and Brienne stood with relief to accept them, that she saw it: on the wall beside the door, facing the bed, hung an old photograph of Tywin with a woman and a child. The child was Jaime, three years of age. The woman was slight and blond and pretty, and big with child. She looked a bit like Brienne’s mother, and she was pregnant with Tyrion.

Brienne gaped at the photograph. She did not want to look at Tysha, terrified of what the kind, dark-haired woman might see on her face, but Tysha tapped Brienne on the shoulder and held up the little writing pad she’d taken out of her pocket.

‘We all make sacrifices for the people we love.’

Brienne read the words once, twice, then met Tysha’s sad eyes. Tysha smiled for Brienne’s benefit, but her eyes remained sad.

Brienne took a deep breath, knowing she was about to say either the right thing or the thing which would damn her forever. “Tyrion should steal you away,” she told Tysha, clutching the ball of rags to her chest. “Or you should steal him. You should run away and never look back.”

Tysha shook her head emphatically, tapped what she had written with her pencil, wrote some more, her letters gone cursive and tilted as though drunk, as they always did when she became agitated.

‘And abandon Jaime? And you? And the children?’

Brienne shuffled her feet, squeezed the rags so hard her palms sweated. “Jaime, yes. And the children. Not me.”

Tysha tapped Brienne on the forehead to make the tall girl look up and meet her eyes, Tysha’s concerned, kind, warm eyes. She had eyes like a doe, caught in a snare and crippled yet still alive.

“I…” Brienne swallowed, felt the tears threaten, could not stop the words rushing out first. “It’s my fault Papa is dead.”

Not a muscle moved on Tysha’s face. She shook her head, a question more than a negation.

“He was away on business. And he had a uniform, his old army uniform he wore when he received the Golden Dragon First Class for bravery, he was a peacekeeper after the Dothraki campaign, he saved a man’s life. It was his most treasured possession, he never took it out or wore it. And I tried it on, while he was away. And I ruined it. And his airship crashed, and he died.” She did not mention her mother’s wedding wreath because her mother had already been dead, and because that part of the story would have made it a mummery rather than a tragedy.

Brienne’s throat and nose felt so constricted she could scarcely breathe, yet her eyes were dry. Tysha shook her head so violently Brienne was worried it might snap clean off her long, white neck.

‘No.’ Tysha shaped the word with her lips, shook her head and her finger in Brienne’s face to prevent the girl from speaking. She scribbled, nearly breaking the pencil point in her hurry.

‘People die. They may die because of their clothes, but their clothes do not kill them. You did not cause it to happen.’

“I…”

Tysha shook her head again, her eyes screwed shut with the passion she could not speak. ‘No,’ her
lips shaped the word again. Such a small word, a tiny hole the world might fall through or be pulled back from the brink.

Brienne was much taller and bigger, but when Tysha took her in her thin arms, pulled Brienne’s head down to her bony shoulder, and rubbed the girl’s rigid, painfully heaving back, Brienne cried and cried as she had not done till then, as she had not allowed herself to cry, not even that day with Jaime in the workroom. Her tears and snot soaked through the sleeve of Tysha’s black dress, and her sobs filled the room like bees. She only half believed what Tysha had stated so decisively, so certainly, but half a conviction was better than the void Brienne had carried around inside her since the day she awoke in her bed on Tarth to find her hair shorn and her heart become a hollow fist made of lead. When she had cried her fill, Tysha smoothed her short hair and climbed up on tiptoe to kiss Brienne’s wet cheek. Then she pinched Brienne’s nose, laughing soundlessly, to tell her she was snuffling.

Brienne blew her nose at the bathroom sink, made a pad from the rags. She shoved the rest of the rags in the cupboard in her and Sansa’s room, then went back to the shop and served customers as though nothing had changed.

She still avoided her own reflection when she washed her face or brushed her teeth or stepped out of the bathtub, but after the conversation with Tysha, when she had a little time to herself, Brienne started to practice her swordfighting steps in her room, in secret.

She had not done any swordfighting since her father’s death, and had ruined her sword in her frenzy after the telegram. But now she passed Wednesday afternoons, during the shop’s half-day closing, clad in trousers, barefoot on the cold, bare floorboards between her bed and Sansa’s cot, going rhythmically through elaborate patterns of salutes and slashes, lunges and ripostes, her hand holding an invisible sword with which she battled faceless phantom opponents. She did not battle Tywin or Mrs. Roelle or the Stranger. That would have led to anger, and anger would have made her foolhardy, rash, would have made her overreach and open herself up to attack. Her opponents were always featureless and voiceless, grey and wispy as the smoke of coal fires. They were no one. They were the world, and Brienne fought them because she could not do otherwise, not because she hoped to win. At the end of the afternoon, she would salute them with genuine respect, and then wash the sweat off her face and neck with icy water and change back into a skirt, so as to appear relatively normal at supper.

Brienne was badly out of shape, and this exercise always left her sweating and unpleasantly achy, but she cherished it. It gave her a sense that there was still some of her old self left. The pain also felt like a penance of sorts, like her hair, like aspects of her new life. The hollowness left in her by her father’s passing had not closed, and fighting without a sword both soothed and kept that wound open. Brienne liked it that way. Her Wednesday afternoons were time out of time, when she need account for herself to no one, need think of no one. Not even herself.

Chapter End Notes

I adopted our words for days of the week, since the details of the Westerosi week have not been mentioned in canon so far.
The Wild Side

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Brienne was toying with her stewed carrots and daydreaming about escaping upstairs to her room for a bit of sword fighting practice after lunch. The shop closed at noon on Wednesdays, but while Tywin usually spent those afternoons in the city, hobnobbing with dealers and wood merchants, he never left till after lunch, and so Brienne’s time apart from the world had to wait a little while longer.

“Right.” Tywin wiped his mouth and dropped his napkin and fork with the finality of a judge passing sentence. So far as he was concerned, the meal was over when he finished eating. “Bolton is bringing some new dealer from Qohor, so I must go all the way to the Street of Silk to meet them. I won’t be back for supper.”

Tysha nodded dutifully from her end of the table. Everyone kept as quiet and still as a mischief of mice until he left, slamming the kitchen door behind him. Sansa did not cry – even she had gotten used to Tywin’s ways. But once they heard the shop door slam, the bell jangling as though heralding the end of the world, the mood in the dining room shifted palpably. Tyrion stretched and sighed with contentment before asking Tysha for another mug of tea, which she filled for him with a smile. Sansa and Jaime engaged in a brief food fight, until Tysha’s sharp gestures made it plain to them that squashed carrots were not a toy. Sansa still lifted her arms above her head and crowed that she had won. Even Pod seemed content to just sit and be with everyone, instead of escaping immediately to his boats.

Still grinning a little in gracious acceptance of defeat to Sansa, Jaime leaned across the table and spoke to Brienne. “Hey, daydreamer. What shall we do this afternoon?”

Brienne started. “Um.” He had spoken so casually, as though they spent every Wednesday afternoon together. “I don’t know,” she said, feeling small and slow.

“Do you want to go for a walk? I could show you a bit of the city.”

Brienne could feel Tyrion and Tysha watching her, though Tyrion made a great show of drinking his tea, as if this were a performance the three Lannisters had agreed upon in advance without telling her. She looked down at her plate, shrugged, knew she was blushing. “All right.”

Jaime nodded, sat back, started talking to Tyrion. As though this were all perfectly regular. Casting about for something solid to which she could tether herself, Brienne looked at Tysha, who gave her what seemed like a conspiratorial smile. Brienne felt like asking if she was even allowed to go walking with Jaime, in the hope that the specter of Tywin’s disapproval would put a stop to the outing then and there. Instead she gave Tysha a weak, watery smile in return, feeling horsey and freckly and not at all the sort of girl who got asked to go out walking by handsome young men.

She went upstairs and changed into trousers. Brienne’s hair had grown a bit in the two months she’d been living in King’s Landing, but it was still short enough that she suspected she would be mistaken for a young man, seen from behind and in trousers. The thought that Jaime would be seen walking with what looked like a tall, gawky, ugly boy with big hands and feet comforted her.

Winters on Tarth were mild, so Brienne lacked a winter coat, nor did she expect Tywin would buy her one. She belted on her raincoat, noticing with a pang that its sleeves no longer quite covered her wrists, and met Jaime in the shop. He had put on a mostly clean shirt under his firefighter’s jacket,
only one splash of crimson paint visible on the shirt’s blindingly white front, and he had combed his long blond hair. Brienne could hear Tyrion play his fiddle and Sansa and Pod argue merrily in the kitchen. She nearly begged off the outing then, nearly took off her coat, escaped into the warm, crowded kitchen, and enjoyed a quiet afternoon of wearing trousers around the house. But when Jaime opened the shop door for her and lifted an ironic, expectant eyebrow, she told herself she did want to explore King’s Landing and it would be rude to beg off after he had gone to the trouble of making himself presentable, so she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and stepped out into the street.

Dog was outside, watched them as they walked out, urinated against the shop wall, then trotted off about his own business. A dubious sort of benediction, as such things went. Jaime and Brienne left their little square and walked downhill, along one of the streets which dropped sharply away from the apex of the hill like the rays of a browbeaten star, lined with houses and shops which had seen better days. Few people were about, and Brienne felt very alone with Jaime. She would have been almost grateful for the incredulous stares of strangers just then. Their silent jeering and judgment would have grounded her, reminded her who she was and who he was, and what they each looked like.

Jaime popped a stick of bubblegum into his mouth. Brienne eyed him, noticed he did not offer her any. He grinned at her look, pink gum caught between his strong, clenched teeth.

“It drives my father insane when I chew gum,” he said by way of explanation, though Tywin was not there.

Brienne understood: Tywin loomed over them all, even when they did something out of the ordinary to escape his oppressive shadow. “Doesn’t he mind your smoking?” she asked, thinking about the piles of wood chips in the workroom, the flammable paint.

“He does. But I don’t smoke in the workroom. And smoking has a certain precedent, it is socially acceptable. Only children and lackwits chew gum.”

Brienne gave him a knowing look. “His words, not yours?”

Jaime winked in response and blew a huge pink bubble. It burst all over his mouth and nose, and he licked the gum back into his mouth. Brienne looked away, blushing.

It was a cold November day, the sun shining valiant and pale through thin clouds. Brienne saw that they were heading toward the tram stop at the bottom of the hill, wondered if Jaime intended for them to actually walk or to ride the tram somewhere. She had no money for the fare, Tywin did not believe in paying family for their work around the shop or in pocket money. And Brienne wanted to explore, not just whiz to a destination as she had done when fabric shopping with Tysha.

“How are we going?” she asked.

“To the park.” Jaime gestured into the distance, somewhere downhill and in front of them, as though offering the whole world for her perusal. “Used to be a tourney ground here, way back when. Then they turned it into a public park about a hundred years ago. The Targaryen dynasty’s gift to the smallfolk. It pretty much went to seed when the area’s fortunes went down in the world, so we should be able to explore to our hearts’ content.”

*Explore what in an abandoned park?* Brienne wondered, but she said nothing, not wanting to sound churlish. If she was being honest with herself, she was glad they were not going to the Red Keep to look at the Targaryens’ crown jewels alongside tourists from Dorne and Winterfell. A quiet, overgrown park sounded quite lovely, actually, almost like being alone in the fields and forests back
on Tarth. Only colder, and in a city. With Jaime there. Brienne shoved her hands into her coat pockets, and they walked on in a silence which was peaceful and companionable rather than unpleasant.

The park gate was padlocked and held shut with a rusting chain, the wrought-iron fence removed long ago and replaced by a palisade of unvarnished planks. Jaime sauntered up to the fence, kicked it, and wrenched two of the planks apart casually, as though that were the proper way to enter anywhere.

He made a face when he saw Brienne hesitate.

“The city council has been threatening to build cheap housing here since I could crawl. Trust me, it’s fine.”

Trust me. Did she trust him? Brienne approached the gap in the fence, and realized that her latest growth spurt made her just a hair taller than Jaime. If she kept growing at this rate, she’d have several inches on him by the time she was done. The knowledge that she had the advantage of height emboldened her. Not that she thought he would try to hurt her, but she would not have put it past him to have planned some sort of prank.

She bent and just about managed to squeeze through the gap in the fence after nearly getting stuck halfway, intensely aware that she was wriggling her rear end trying to get free.

“You’re a right big cow, aren’t you?” Jaime commented behind her, mildly amused.

“It’s… a tight… fit,” Brienne panted, flushed furiously when she heard herself, breathless and saying that.

Jaime chuckled, slipped easily through the gap after her, dancer-smooth.

They were in a decaying jungle, a cloggy, cold, moist pleasure garden run amok. Unlike trees on the high, windswept square, the trees in the park still had most of their leaves, leaves which should have been colored a multitude of hues, yet were drab in polluted, smoky yellows and browns. Branches had been left to sprout every which way. Some trees had toppled entirely. Bushes not trimmed in years burst their topiary forms as though overflowing with excess flesh. Paths were swallowed up by the shrubbery. No birds sang. The air itself was wet and cloying with mist and mulch. Jaime and Brienne might have been Bran the Shipwright, who had reached a mysterious shore beyond the Sunset Sea after all.

Brienne could hardly believe she was not in a real forest, just an abandoned park in the middle of a dirty city. As they made their way through the wild growth, truly explorers in an untouched land, she realized that Jaime must have come to this park often, since he seemed to be moving with purpose, leading her toward a specific location. Not really exploring at all. Was this what he did on his Wednesday afternoons? Came here and pretended he was worlds away from Tywin and the rest of them?

Jaime moved some branches aside and revealed a whole new vista, a pathetic remnant of civilization being slowly eaten away by the resurgent wilderness. In what must have been the very heart of the park there spread a wide floor of black and white marble squares. It looked like a dance floor, like small wrought-iron tables would have stood around its edges once, lemonade and cake being served to those who preferred watching over dancing. There was even a podium for a long-vanished band.

Jaime headed purposefully across the marble floor. Brienne followed more slowly.
She was remembering a schoolyard superstition, that if you walked across a black and white checked floor and stepped on any of the black squares, something terrible would happen. But terrible things had already happened to Brienne, so she wondered if the opposite might also be true. If you stepped only on the white squares, might you not wake up when you reached the far side and discover that what you had thought your life was nothing but a bad dream?

She started across the floor, careful to step only in the very centers of the white squares, avoiding their edges, and was halfway across when she considered herself as a stranger might, as someone peering at them from the bushes would see her, and stopped in midstep. This was ridiculous. You could no more invite misfortune by stepping on a black piece of fancy stone than you could by… ruining your father’s precious uniform by the light of a harvest moon?

Brienne took a sharp breath of cold air, swallowed. Then she very deliberately stepped on a black square and walked the rest of the way with her head held high, her eyes trained on Jaime, careful not to look down at her feet.

Chapter End Notes

Again I decided to split one chapter into two so as not to make it significantly longer than other chapters in this fic… and to prolong your anticipation of what else will happen during Jaime and Brienne’s walk in the park. ;-)
Jaime waited for Brienne across from the band stand, next to an ornate plinth of white marble gone grey and green with mulch and sooty rain and pollution. Behind it, face down in the muddy grass, lay the statue of a woman, rendered larger than life-size.

Brienne skirted the plinth for a better look. The statue was voluptuous and long-haired, her rump in the air and her face pressed into the ground, a parody of who the woman might once have been. Brienne was just about to look for her name on the plinth when she spotted it: snaking over the woman’s left shoulder was the scaly tail of a baby dragon. Another tail twined around her skirts, her ankles. The dragons were pressed into the earth by the weight of the stone woman, invisible.

“Daenerys Targaryen, the First of Her Name,” Jaime intoned sardonically, snapping gum. “Queen of the Andals and the First Men, Mother of Dragons, now Mistress of the Wasteland and Queen of Sweet Fuck All, eating dirt like the rest of us.”

The queen who had restored the Targaryens to power after a period known as the Baratheon Interregnum. The park must have been dedicated to her by her descendants, centuries removed. She was more myth than historical figure. Brienne had learned about her in second grade: that was how far removed from everyday reality the Targaryen queen was.

“She’s a fallen woman,” Brienne mused, remembering Mrs. Roelle’s lectures about young ladies who did not watch out for men with amorous intentions, repeated ad nauseam when Brienne had first started her monthlies. “Poor thing.”

“Don’t feel too bad for her,” Jaime said. “She had three dragons to keep her warm and seven kingdoms as her footstool.”

He took the wad of bubblegum out of his mouth and stuck it to the top of the plinth. His offering to the spirits of the place, where men had once bled in melees and genteel couples twirled to the sounds of politely romantic tunes. Jaime reached behind the plinth and came up with something long and thin, wrapped in an old, stained tarpaulin.

Brienne was instantly suspicious. Her wariness turned to confusion when Jaime unwrapped the tarpaulin to reveal two long, nearly straight branches, peeled clean of bark and twigs. He hefted them, one in each hand, and Brienne saw that they were almost the same length. Her breath caught: they were sword-length, the length of the sword she had broken back on Tarth.

She met Jaime’s eyes and saw nervousness, mischievousness and mulishness fighting for supremacy there. She felt submerged in his green, oceanic gaze for the second time in their acquaintance. He held one of the branches out to her, gestured at the black and white floor with the other, smiled his crooked smile.

“May I have this dance, my lady?”

Brienne’s breaths were coming fast, too fast. She might faint if she did not get a handle on herself. She swallowed thickly, forced words out. “How did you know?”

He watched her, his expectant smile turning nervy and strained at the edges. “Father mentioned you used to swordfight, before. And I heard you thumping through the steps. We share a very thin wall.”
Brienne did not move. Jaime shrugged, looked away. “Thought it might be a treat for you.”

A treat. To what? Pretend to fight him, who knew more about holding a paintbrush than a sword, in an abandoned park in the middle of this godsforsaken city?

Brienne seized the branch Jaime still held out to her, though it was starting to waver in his outstretched hand. She hefted it for balance, found a good grip on one end of it. It was lighter than a sword, but the right length and generally the right shape. How long must he have combed through this plant-choked wasteland before he found two branches of the right length, not rotted, not too green, stripped them of bark and made them smooth, maybe with tools stolen from the workroom, on his afternoons off?

She lifted her sword in a formal salute. A moment later Jaime returned it, imitating her gesture. They moved out onto the marble checked floor, to which Brienne now paid close attention, and so noticed it was full of cracks, wet leaves stuck to its surface, tiny puddles. A wealth of possibilities for twisted ankles and nasty falls. Good, a challenge. Though she would have to see how Jaime fared first.

Brienne started slow, attacking and watching how he defended himself. He was untrained, rough in his parries and slashes, but had a natural grace and lithe strength which made up for his lack of skill somewhat. Brienne knew she was out of shape, so she saved her strength and went in cautiously, let him go on the attack whenever she saw a tell that he wanted to (gritted teeth, narrowed eyes). She had strength and skill, however rusty, but he had enthusiasm and stamina.

Within minutes, they had worked out a nice pace, back and forth, overhand, underhand, slash and parry, step back, press the advantage, again and again, endless variations on basic steps. Their swords clacked hollowly against each other, and Brienne’s blood sang. Jaime was flushed, sweating, grinning, enjoying himself, and she knew she was grinning as well, could feel cold air whistling between her teeth.

She danced backward to draw him out and slipped, went down on one knee, winced at the sharp contact with hard marble. Jaime was already swinging, too late to stop or avert his sword. It hit Brienne on the upper arm. She grunted with the pain but did not drop her sword.

Jaime dropped the point of his, resting it on a white marble square, and gaped at her uncertainly. The young man who had suffered blows since he could remember stopped in his tracks after he inadvertently hit her. Brienne had never seen him off his guard like that before, not even when Tywin had hit him. He looked like a little boy caught doing something more than naughty, something unforgivable.

“Don’t you know one little thrust would disembowel you right now, with your guard down like that?” she asked didactically. Then she sprang to her feet, feinting toward his stomach.

He blocked the blow clumsily. She slid her branch down his with a scraping noise, and went for an overhead swing. He just about managed to block that one as well. All of a sudden, they were no longer playing, their branches locked, chests heaving, the rough surface of the wood not allowing them to slide free as polished metal would have done. Brienne’s nose was barely three inches from Jaime’s, she could see the strain around his eyes as she used all of her strength to push him back. He grimaced with the effort, and she remembered herself. This was not the Stormlands regional championship, nor was she in her room battling a faceless opponent. Jaime was not her enemy.

She sprang backward, letting go of her branch. It clattered away across the wet marble. Jaime nearly fell on his face when the resistance offered by Brienne vanished, but managed to catch himself just in time, using his sword as a stick to prop himself up.
They were both doubled over, heaving. Brienne’s arms and thighs burned, and she knew she would be sore come morning, but she didn’t care. She looked up and grinned at Jaime, was met with a grin of his own.

“What was that you said?” he asked between deep breaths. “About dropping one’s guard? I could chop your head off right now.”

“With a branch?” she replied primly. “Don’t be silly.”

Jaime laughed, straightened, used his branch as a walking cane to strike a pose. “You dropped your sword. I win.”

That brought her shooting up to her full height, even as a stitch tugged at her side. “You do not! I was beating you since we started.”

“Oh ho ho, were you now? I seem to remember you slipping and nearly dropping your sword and then, yes, indeed, *dropping it!”*

“Only because I realized you’d get hurt if I kept pressing the advantage. I spared you.”

He scoffed, waved his branch in taunting triumph. Brienne squeezed her hands into fists, fighting the urge to push him in the chest and send him sprawling on the wet marble floor.

“Don’t feel bad, Brienne,” Jaime said obnoxiously. “Your swordfghting is still better than some of your other skills. That cat you drew for Sansa yesterday? It looked more like a storm cloud with eyes.”

“It was a cow,” Brienne mumbled. “A black and white cow. Sansa decided it was a cat and drew whiskers on it.”

Jaime burst out laughing. Brienne came at him then, not as quickly as she could have, for she was winded and did not truly wish to do him an injury, so he had time enough to drop his branch, catch her hands, open and held in front of her to push him, and use her momentum to bring her closer to him.

And kiss her.

Brienne froze with his lips on hers. She had pressed her lips together in anger as she came at him, and Jaime’s mouth was closed as well, yet… soft, warm, slightly moist and chapped. It moved gently against her lips, his stubble scratching her, not unpleasantly. More nuzzling than kissing. Not that Brienne knew the difference. She drew a deep, convulsive breath through her nose as well as her mouth, and he opened his mouth with her, and slipped his tongue inside.

His tongue stroked hers, once, twice, three times, quick as a petting hand, but wetter, stronger. Jaime was so close Brienne could only see a sliver of his nose, his temple, his closed eye. He shifted a little, inclined his head, and went back to her lips and only her lips, sucking on her lower lip for a moment, even parting from her for long enough she could have pushed him away, she really could have. But it felt so good, she leaned in, after him, and met his lips and tongue again.

This time he used his teeth, running them over her lip gently before soothing the friction with soft, wet. Brienne had no idea what she was doing as she tried to imitate what he had done by sucking on his upper lip, feeling the stubble there, tasting the bubblegum. Jaime seemed to approve from the noise he made, half rumble half sigh, and Brienne marveled that a kiss could produce so many sounds, the soft smacking of parting lips, the embarrassing yet promising slurp of saliva, the inhalations, the scratch-scratch of his stubble on the sensitive skin around her mouth, the tiny moan...
she made whenever he let her go only to come back and try something new, another angle, another way for wet flesh to slide together, for tongues and teeth to tease.

She let him take the lead in this, let her eyes close and focused all her senses on her mouth, on his hand cupping the back of her neck, his shoulders tensing and shifting minutely beneath her palms. She wished he weren’t wearing his stupid firefighter’s jacket, just the white shirt so she could feel the warmth of his skin under her hands. How did this happen? A minute ago she was going to push him for being annoying, and before that they had fought with branches pretending they were knights or fencers, and she had never even kissed a boy before. But he wasn’t some boy, he was Jaime, and Brienne kept expecting to step on a black square and find this was just an ugly, taunting dream, her own mind mocking her with his eyes and smile.

He pressed the advantage, his tongue tangling with hers, in her mouth, wanting and not leaving her alone for a moment. Had she pressed him like this with branch in hand, she would have beaten him black and blue, but she did not mind. It was all she could do to keep up with him, tongues dancing, sliding, unfamiliar moans escaping through her nose, entire universes opening up in her mouth. Her body felt taut and raw, so close to his.

Jaime pulled away from her. She followed him instinctively until she opened her eyes and found him holding her at arm’s length, his hand fallen from her neck to her shoulder, her fists clutching at his jacket without her permission. Brienne blinked and licked her lips, feeling wonderfully gnawed on, her lips wet and cooling rapidly and swollen as with heatstroke.

Jaime smiled that crooked, lazy smile she had come to both dread and crave. “Huh, so you didn’t turn into a princess,” he drawled, just a little out of breath. “I’d have thought a kiss might have improved your looks a bit. Guess I can’t be right all the time. And I still won.”

Brienne’s mouth was an ice cave, all the soft wet tingliness he had left behind frozen in the November air. She could feel her face scrunching up like a used handkerchief, red and hideous, as she let go of Jaime’s jacket, swung back, and not so much pushed him as slammed both open palms against his chest, sent him toppling backward onto the marble dance floor. He skidded a little way across wet leaves and slick stone, and she did not even pause to check if he had hit his head or to enjoy the look of incredulity on his face the moment before her hands had hit him with a bone-jarring thump.

She turned and stomped across the black and white squares, skidding a little, back toward the thicket of trees and shrubs from which they had emerged.

Chapter End Notes

So, that happened. Jaime might need some “what not to say to a girl right after you give her her first kiss” lessons at charm school.
Brienne fought her way back to the gap in the fence, tearing the cuff of her coat sleeve as she pushed branches out of her way, ripping out handfuls of dying leaves in her fury. She had not felt so angry and desperate since the day she wrecked her father’s room, a lifetime ago and a world away. She tore the pocket of her coat while shoving and wriggling her way through the gap between two planks, panting furiously. She stomped all the way back to the shop with her head down, staring intently at the pavement beneath her feet.

She did not dare look back to see if Jaime followed, for she could not decide which would be worse: to see him sauntering along some yards behind her, his hands in his pockets and a smile on his face, probably chewing the gum he had pried off of Daenerys Targaryen’s stone plinth, or to see the street stretch behind her, empty of all life, the very image of her barren, cold-pinched soul. Whichever the case, it would have been dreadful, and so Brienne kept her head down and barreled on uphill. The day had turned even chillier, but she was flushed and sweating by the time she reached the top of the hill and the cobblestoned square.

Her nose felt stuffed with ice crystals and her eyes blurred as she pushed her way into the shop, setting the little bell jangling madly. She was back, but she was not home, and she was not safe. She had to pass by the kitchen to get to the stairs, saw Sansa sprawled on the floor in one of her pinafores, playing with bits of raw dough as though they were plasticine. Tysha was baking, a delicious smell emanating from the oven, inviting, reassuring. Smelling of home.

Brienne heard Tysha move toward the kitchen door, having heard her come in, no doubt. She escaped up the stairs as quickly as her long legs would carry her, grateful for once that Tysha couldn’t call out after her.

Brienne closed the door to her room very quietly behind her, as though to confuse pursuers, then flung herself onto her bed. It sagged and creaked unmelodiously under her weight. She buried her face in Bear’s worn fur with its dusty, peppery smell, and allowed herself to rage.

Of all the many, many taunts, jeers and jests she had suffered from peers and elders alike, this was by far the worst. It was the worst because since coming to King’s Landing Brienne had not had to contend with people who considered it normal to make fun of her. Tywin watched her coldly, and the shopkeepers around the square as well as some of the customers looked startled when first they beheld her, but the other people in the house treated her as a person, not as a freak or a beast. Even Jaime’s teasing, cruel as it could be, was not truly malicious, she had learned.

Brienne thought about him looking for those branches, making them as sword-like as he could, electing to chew gum rather than smoke while they walked to the park. She wondered how much of what had transpired he had planned. He had planned the walk and the swordfight, certainly, but the kisses?

He had chewed gum, because he knew she was repelled by his smoking, though she couldn’t keep her eyes to herself whenever he licked a hand-rolled cigarette with the tip of his tongue and stuck it between his lips in her presence.

Brienne tried to smother herself with Bear’s bulging belly, but it did no good. She screamed, roared her wordless fury and humiliation into the old toy, the sounds muffled and rumblly in her ears like the echo of the earth’s core shifting far below. It made her feel a little better, a little less weighed down, but it did not improve her mood. She was infuriated by Jaime’s premeditation and by his impulsiveness, by how real and sincere the kisses had felt and how real and sincere his mockery had
sounded, and how she had responded, even though she really should have known better.

She was not a fool or an infant. She knew what it was men and women did together, in theory at least. She had read books, she had listened to gossip in the girls’ washroom while crouching on the toilet seat so her feet would not be visible under the cubicle door, she had sat through excruciatingly embarrassing, anatomy-focused but otherwise vague biology lectures in school. Mrs. Roelle had warned her about men and their words and smiles many times, though Brienne had been certain she would never find herself in a situation where that advice would apply to her. Some of the boys back on Tarth had tried to grab her breasts during schoolyard fights in the last year or so, but Brienne had not thought it was because they liked her or even desired her.

She could not believe someone like Jaime could like or desire her, dared not believe it, despite how her mouth still tingled from their kissing. He was a prince playing dress-up as a pauper and liked to be cruel, while she was a refugee in life, always the square peg, the ugly girl whose father’s death sat under her ribs like a stone. Who had allowed the first young man who said a kind word to her to slip into the empty space inside her heart, even if he said five cruel words for every kind one.

Brienne rolled over on her bed, so her face rested next to Bear, his fur now wet with her tears. She sniffled, feeling self-pity warm her a little. The knowledge of just what it was men and women did together did not seem to match her confused, tentative, half-formed fantasies on those muggy afternoons when she had sat in her darkened bedroom on Tarth, fondling herself shyly and squeezing her thighs together. Even when she had imagined a man’s hands where her hands had been, his hips causing that faint, tantalizing friction between her legs, he had been a man without a face, a name, a smell, even a body shape. She could not imagine Jaime as that man, would not do it.

Brienne stood, still furious but cooler about it now, more contained, and took off her raincoat. Her room was cold, but she felt hot, sweating and exhausted from her anger and headlong flight from the park. Her legs and arms ached from the swordfight, her knee throbbed where she had hit it on the marble dance floor, and there was a tender spot on her upper arm where Jaime had accidentally struck her with his sword. Brienne was determined not to think about any of it. Do not think of him as kind, she instructed herself sternly. His every kindness is edged with sharp words, sharp blades which will hurt you if you get too near.

She sat back down on the bed with her raincoat folded on her lap, and picked up Bear. “Do you think he knows, Bear?” she asked the worn-out toy, trying for a touch of levity to lift her gloom. “Do you think he even knows how to do it?” The thought of Jaime naked and bewildered made her blush and laugh and feel just a little better, even if she did not dare picture more of him than his face and his chest, glimpsed through an unbuttoned pajama jacket. It comforted her to think of Jaime as similar to her, shy and young and vulnerable, even as she told herself to think of him as cold, hard, sharp, an enemy.

Footsteps sounded on the landing.

Brienne froze, Bear gripped convulsively in her hands. She knew the footsteps of every member of the household, had learned to recognize them coming her way, the way an animal peeking out from the foliage knows the hunter, the wolf, the bear passing through the forest. Even before he opened the door next to hers and went into his room, she knew it was Jaime, back at last, not having bothered to hurry and catch up with her. Brienne sat motionless on her bed, and hated him, and wished he would flee before the force of her hate as before a swarm of angry bees.

The walls in the house were indeed thin enough that she could hear Jaime switch on the light and move around his room, could see him before her mind’s eye as he took off his firefighter’s jacket and dropped his shoes on the floor. Brienne closed her eyes and refused to think about him, but he
moved inside her head still, his head bowed, his face set, a caged lion on the prowl.

He knocked on the wall, once, twice, three times, as though it were a door and he were actually considerate enough to request admittance.

Brienne started, the bed shifted and creaked beneath her. Night came early that time of year. Though it was just past teatime her room was filled with shadows, the fat roses on her walls mere smudges of dark red. She sat on the bed, staring at the wall separating her from Jaime, convinced she had heard wrong, imagined it.

He knocked on the wall again, twice, more loudly now, impatiently, with his fist rather than his knuckles. He knocked in a specific place, and Brienne fixed her gaze there, willed the wall not to fall before his assault, to keep her safe and isolated.

In the space between two roses, a spot of light appeared. Brienne drew in a sharp breath, disbelieving the wall would let her down like that. Then she realized the solid, dependable wall was not cracking. She was looking at a neat, round hole, about the size of a copper star, through which light shone from the other room. An obstruction had been removed, and the hole stared at her like an opponent at swordfighting practice.

Brienne put Bear and her raincoat down on the bed and approached the wall warily, still not entirely convinced it would not fall and crush her. The round spot of light passed over her shins as she drew nearer, up her knees, her thighs. She knelt on the cold, hard floor and looked through the wall, feeling like she was at the kitchen keyhole again, and was about to hear music and see Jaime dance.

His room was furnished more sparsely than hers. A bed with white sheets, unmade and rumpled, the blanket dragging on the floor. She could imagine Jaime was a restless sleeper. A chair, painted bright red. A square of mirror by the window overlooking the cobblestoned square. It did not surprise Brienne that the only mirror in the house, other than the speckled, green thing in the bathroom, should be in Jaime’s room. His slovenliness was at least half an act put on to irritate his father, but his vanity was very real.

Jaime passed before the hole. Brienne jerked back, then remembered he could not see her, he had moved whatever he used to block the hole out of the way so she would come and look through it. There was no doubt in her mind the hole had been made deliberately, probably some time after her arrival, round and neat and perfect for watching while kneeling on a pillow or a folded blanket, drilled with one of Tywin’s tools. For all that Jaime had never apprenticed as a woodcarver, he certainly invented all kinds of uses for sharp tools, Brienne thought wryly, bitterly. She applied her eye to the hole again, curious in spite of herself.

Jaime was in his white shirt with the red stain, the corduroy trousers he had worn for their excursion to the park. His jacket lay discarded on the floor, his shoes flung into a corner. He was barefoot as he came back across the room, carrying a large canvas. He propped it up against the wall, squarely in Brienne’s field of vision. When he stepped back, all she could see was the painting. It filled the whole world.

It was of her. She stood on a grassy hillock, surrounded by a lush, wild jungle painted in colors she recognized from Jaime’s work on the toys, brilliant purples and pinks and greens so thick and glossy Brienne could almost taste the juicy leaves between her teeth, smell the flowers. There was something of the abandoned park about the background against which he had painted her, but it was a warmer place, a place near the sea, nourished by warm wind and rain and a sun not veiled by clouds and smog. She could not see the sea in the painting, but a seagull hovered in the sky directly above her painted head, as though it had just risen from the tangled nest which was her blond hair.
The Brienne in the painting held a sword in her right hand, not a slender ladies’ foil, but a great two-handed broadsword of the kind she had only ever seen in pictures and in the tiny historical museum on Tarth. Her painted self seemed quite at ease with the big, heavy weapon, her hand sure on its pommel, its wickedly sharp tip resting lightly on the ground. Around her waist was a belt with a scabbard for the sword, which hung empty on her hip. She wore nothing else. Her breasts were small, the merest buds, as they were in life, her shoulders and hips were broad, her pubic hair was coarse and abundant and dark blond. Freckles dotted her everywhere like tiny dark stars. She sported a ferocious scowl, and her eyes were very large and very blue. They shone like two living sapphires. Brienne could imagine Jaime painting her scowling at him, carefully tracing her eyebrows with his brush. The thought made her almost smile. Although he had not made her pretty, not idealized her like the nude women in her father’s art books, although he had carefully recorded her freckles, her nose, her teeth, the breadth and solidity of her body, there was a suggestion of a womanly shape about her, more hinted at than actually shown. She was herself and also both Warrior and Maiden, wholly ferocious and untouchable and… yes, desirable.

Is this what I look like? Brienne wondered. Or is this just how he would like me to look?

He must have watched her while she changed her clothes, while she practiced her swordfighting steps (that was how he knew, the liar), while she prepared the pads for her monthlies and sometimes cried, hugging herself on her bed. He must have spent all his free afternoons watching her, painting her, going to the park to look for branches and fashion swords for her and him. He had watched her for days, weeks, and still met her eye across the supper table as though nothing untoward had happened.

Brienne searched herself for signs of outrage and found she was not as outraged as she knew she should be, then felt a bit outraged at her lack of outrage. She was also amused, touched, blushing, angry. Her stomach whirred as though crickets sang inside it. She did not feel violated, and that certainty both lifted and worried her. She should have marched straight in there and beaten him bloody, for she knew she could, yet felt no desire to do so.

As though he had heard her thoughts, Jaime appeared in Brienne’s field of vision again. His long hair brushed the floorboards. He was walking on his hands, making hardly any noise, his long, slim body wavering just a little as he navigated the expanse of his room in front of her eyes. He was almost out of the area she could see, and Brienne shifted a little to keep following his progress when he stopped, his arms moving the way someone only pretending to be drunk weaves on their feet. He came crashing to the floor with a loud, theatrical thump. Brienne winced on his behalf.

Jaime sat up at once, unharmed, pulled his shirt off over his head in a single, smooth, heart-catching motion, and sat back on his heels, hands resting loosely on his knees, facing the wall.

Looking right at her.

Brienne bit her lip so he would not hear her breathe.

Even with the bruises on his chest where she had shoved him shading from red to purple, he was smooth and golden like a lit candle, outlined against the garish portrait of her he had painted, and he let her look at him, look over every part of him. Brienne thought mulishly that he should strip completely, fair’s fair, but she balked at the thought at once, not certain she could handle the sight of all his flesh.

Jaime’s hands lifted from his knees and settled on the belt holding up his corduroy trousers, low on his slim hips, as though in acknowledgement that the thought had occurred to him too, but he knew it would be too much. He gave an exaggerated shrug, kept looking at her steadily, his face blank, clean, his eyes just a little red-rimmed. It was all the apology Brienne was going to get, and it did not
cover the kisses. For that he would not apologize, and Brienne felt relieved, some of her anger and bitter humiliation washing out of her. She was a stupid, ugly girl, but she was not a complete fool. What had happened was real, despite what he had said to her afterward.

Brienne fetched the cane-backed chair she used to fold the clothes she had worn during the day, and placed it so that its back covered the hole in the wall. Then she hung her raincoat over the back of the chair for good measure.

That evening, while everyone else had a good time in Tywin’s absence, laughing and chatting over supper, Tysha scribbling over the entire blackboard, Brienne and Jaime sat very quietly, scarcely looking up from their plates. Tysha had made one of her delicious meat pies with green beans and mashed potatoes soaked in butter, and Brienne ate hungrily. The exercise, the cold air, the tears and emotional upheaval had made her stomach growl. She ignored Jaime as he ignored her, and shoveled food into her mouth until Tysha wrote ‘Your walk has given you two an appetite!!’ on the blackboard.

Tyrion grinned knowingly at his brother, then at Brienne. Brienne blushed and choked. Pod thumped her on the back, and she offered to help Tysha with dessert, which was chocolate pudding served in capacious ceramic bowls. She balanced three bowls on her large palm, put down Tysha’s first, then Jaime’s, then Tyrion’s, while Tysha served the children.

Leaning down to place Jaime’s bowl by his right hand, Brienne deliberately let her forearm brush his shoulder, an echo of her silent gesture of reassurance to him that first morning, after she had seen Tywin hit him and Jaime had put on a great show of not caring.

Apology tentatively accepted.

Under the noise of Sansa and Pod attacking their pudding, Brienne heard Jaime draw breath sharply, felt him stiffen under her arm. He did not turn, did not lift his head, but he shifted slightly, so his shoulder brushed the sensitive skin on the underside of her arm through her sleeve as she withdrew.

Brienne left her raincoat on the chair in front of the hole regardless. If Jaime wanted to look at her, he could gods-darned well ask in words rather than smirks and winks, she thought as she put on her pajamas that evening, enjoying the prickle of cold air on her naked skin, like the brush of a ghostly lover’s fingers.
Tysha only ever wore one piece of jewelry, and only one garment which was not black.

The garment was a dress of dull grey wool, a grey which was the negation of all color rather than a color in its own right. It seemed to leech even the color from the objects nearest to it, like a slowly spreading lichen. The dress itself was shapeless, with too short, too tight sleeves and a boxy hem which hit midway down the shins. It was the sort of dress a novice septa might have worn, and it sucked away all the charm from Tysha’s face. She was very beautiful, even if very skinny, but that dress was an enemy to beauty. Tysha only ever wore it on Sunday afternoons, when Tywin, who recognized no day of rest save perhaps the half-day closing on Wednesdays, came up from the workroom like a demon from the seventh hell, to preside over Sunday tea and lord it over his family.

Brienne could not imagine Tysha going into a shop, trying on dress after dress, and finally deciding this was the right one. No more could she imagine Tysha, whose fingers sewed magic out of mere cloth, making it for herself. She had even mended the torn sleeve and pocket on Brienne’s raincoat so they looked untouched, and never asked how the damage had occurred. She might have found the dress in a junk shop, and it had been the only dress there ugly enough that Tysha could afford it with the little bit of money she filched from her housekeeping allowance, for things Tywin did not think worth providing for. Most likely, Brienne suspected, Tysha had opened her clothes cupboard one day after she became Tywin’s not-wife and found the dress hanging there like one of his puppets, picked out by him as something suitable for her to wear on Sunday afternoons.

Brienne cared nothing for clothes, provided they fit her and no skirts were involved. Clothes she was rapidly outgrowing and skirts were very much in evidence since the move to King’s Landing. She bridled at it, but she accepted it as her new lot in life. Yet Brienne would have fought tooth and nail, had Tywin tried to make her wear something like that dress. At least this was what she told herself as she watched Tysha, miserable and colorless in the grey thing.

The one piece of jewelry Brienne ever saw Tysha wear did not truly belong to Tysha, even more so than that dreadful dress. It was a necklace, a collar of polished gold, shaped like two hands forming an O, hinged at the wrists, with the opening between their clasped fingertips. When Tywin brought it out of whatever hidden cubbyhole he kept it in, and locked it shut around Tysha’s neck while she knelt beside his chair in the dining room like a slave girl being claimed by her new master, it was as though Tywin were snapping shackles on them all, so loudly did the gold snick as the fingers met and locked around Tysha’s throat, under her quivering chin.

The necklace was heavy and precious. Brienne was certain Tywin had had it made by someone as skilled with metal as he was with wood, and as cruel. There was a rhyme which must have inspired him, an ironic ditty about women’s fickleness: Hands of gold are always cold, but a woman’s hands are warm. Brienne could not imagine Tywin making Jaime and Tyrion’s mother wear the monstrous object, which prevented Tysha from turning her head or swallowing any food or drink when she wore it, while the rest of them choked down Sunday tea. She had to walk tall and proud with the barbaric-looking ornament around her neck, like a Dothraki khaleesi of old. The gold glimmered above the deadly dull grey dress, yet Tysha’s eyes were anxious and sad and not proud at all. She looked beautiful, and she suffered for it. It made Brienne glad she was not beautiful, so Tywin would never hit upon the idea of making her wear something like that necklace. The thought comforted and shamed her all at once.
Every Sunday they gathered for the donning of the necklace and Sunday tea as for a ghastly ritual, and every Sunday Brienne covertly searched the other faces at the table, searched herself for signs of loathing and anger, and found plenty of both. Yet none of them did anything.

‘We all make sacrifices for the people we love,’ Tysha had written for Brienne’s benefit the day of her first monthlies since coming to King’s Landing. Brienne clenched her hands under the table, willed herself to stand up and strangle Tywin where he sat, smugly crippling his young not-wife for his amusement, demonstrating his power over them all by putting Tysha’s flesh to such harsh use. But then Brienne would look at Pod and Sansa, pale and terrified beside her, she would look across the table at Jaime’s drawn face, at Tyrion’s blank mask. Brienne could do nothing lest she risked them getting caught in the maelstrom, if she were to challenge Tywin. So she sat unmoving through Tysha’s ritual humiliation, and railed against them all inside her head, and loathed herself most of all.

“He fucks her every Sunday between teatime and supper, you know,” Jaime informed Brienne one Monday morning at the tail end of November, a couple of weeks after their walk in the park.

They had danced around each other since that day, the day of the swordfight, the kisses and the hole in the wall, tentative and wary, both aware of a shift in their relationship yet at a loss as to what to do about it. They avoided being alone together by tacit agreement, made sure not to let their fingers brush while passing each other the salt, not to let their arms and shoulders touch when they washed and dried dishes in silence or placed food in front of each other as part of the small things they did for Tysha, to make her life more bearable.

Sometimes Brienne looked up from her plate to find Jaime frozen in mid-chew, his green eyes riveted to the fork slipping between her lips, the way her mouth moved as she ate, the roll of her throat as she swallowed. His gaze was like a hand on her lips, fingers in her mouth. He’d look up from her mouth and meet her eyes, and on his face she would see amusement, mockery, regret, and something she could not quite pinpoint but strongly suspected was want, lust, maybe even desire. It made her stomach contract, made her feel like she did when she rubbed her thighs together quietly in the dark, which she had started doing again, while Sansa slept in her cot. Brienne could barely swallow until Jaime’s eyes released her and looked down at his own plate, until he resumed eating as though nothing had happened.

Sometimes she heard him move around in his room and longed to knock on the wall, to move the chair aside and peer at him through the hole he had drilled to spy on her. She wondered if she would see a green eye peering back at her. I can see you, too. She never did try it.

She looked at Jaime now where he sat perched on the counter. They had had no customers all morning, though that would alter soon, with Winter’s Eve just a few weeks away and people starting to think about all the presents they had to buy. Brienne was kept busy polishing every flat surface in the shop, counting inventory, making sure they were well stocked up on wrapping paper and string.

The day had started badly down in the workroom. Though he was supposed to be painting, Jaime had been toying with a chisel, joking with Pod while his father fumed. The chisel slipped and sliced his hand, right down to the bone. Brienne could hear Tywin’s muffled roar (You did that on purpose, get out of my sight), then Jaime came up, grim and silent and dripping blood. Tywin had not hit him, Brienne was certain of it, but he could not work with his hand smarting and thickly bandaged by Tysha, leaving Pod all alone downstairs with the monster.

Jaime sat on the counter, dangling his long legs like a morose child, using his good left hand to toy with the fiddling and fluting boy and girl monkeys.

“Oh yes,” he said in response to Brienne’s silence. “Every Sunday after six. We set the clocks in this house by the regularity of Father fucking Tysha. That’s why Tyrion always goes out on Sundays.
after tea. You can hear them at it, or you can hear Father at least, if you’re ever upstairs, the walls are worthless.”

Neither of them said anything about the wall between their rooms. Brienne could see it in her head, as though his crude way of describing it had made it real: Tywin’s heaving, naked back, Tysha’s thin arms straining, grasping the headboard of their bed for dear life, the photograph on the wall facing the bed, Tywin, little Jaime and his dead mother looking on, silent. The image chilled Brienne to her core, a breath of longest winter.

Suddenly Jaime spat: “To hells with him!” and flung the musical monkeys against the far wall of the shop. The toy shattered with a tinkle of tin and a splintering of wood, the music-box mechanism died with a twang. Miraculously, nobody appeared to investigate the noise. They might have been alone in the house, although Tywin and Pod were in the workroom, Tysha and Sansa in the kitchen, Tyrion’s fiddle faintly audible from his tiny room at the very back of the house.

“Jaime,” Brienne said softly, lifted her hand to touch his arm, but he shrugged her off violently. He couldn’t abide pity, but pity was not what she was trying to give him. Her hand wavered by his tense arm, then she let it drop and went around the counter to clean up the ruined toy.

“Don’t worry about your brother,” Jaime said behind her, his voice still tense but softer, calmer. “Father’s delighted with him, doesn’t even mind that Pod will only make model boats. We might expand into the ships-in-a-bottle business, Pod’s that good. That is,” he grinned as Brienne brought the remains of the toy back to the counter, “if I am ever able to paint them finished. Though Father might find a trained monkey to replace me, of course.”

“How long do you think it will take you to heal?” Brienne asked, arranging the broken pieces of the toy in a neat row for lack of something better to do.

Jaime shrugged, as though he didn’t care, as though his painting hand were the furthest thing from his mind. He jumped off the counter with the look of a man who had just remembered he had important business to attend to.

Brienne suddenly could not stand to let him leave. The realization of just how much she had missed being alone with him, talking to him, listening to him mock and joke, washed through her like a wave of the wintry sea.

“Jaime, wait.”

Her hand was on his shoulder before she could stop it, big and broad yet feather-light. She had grown a bit more since the day in the park, and actually had to look down into Jaime’s eyes, if only by a fraction of an inch. His face was shuttered, but she knew him well enough by now to spot the telltale signs of expectation, of nervousness. He would have made a rotten swordsman, she thought, always giving himself away.

She moved till she was standing in front of him, and put both hands on his shoulders. “This is not pity,” she said, enunciating every word, her heart heavy as a cannonball in her chest. Then she leaned in, and a bit down, and kissed him.

She was gripped by her own boldness, her body tense as she expected him to push her away, send her sprawling as she had done to him on the black and white dance floor in the park. A long moment passed before Jaime exhaled loudly through his nose and parted his lips, his tongue darting out to stroke Brienne’s lower lip briefly. His hands came to rest on her hips, the left gripping her hipbone, the right just there, bandaged and inert.
They kissed differently than they had done in the park. There was no overt challenge and response in these kisses, no fevered exploration. Their lips kept parting and coming together like skittish dancers, their tongues greeting each other, teeth and lips pecking and nipping and withdrawing and swooping in again to meet each other halfway. Neither led the other, rather they met in the middle and danced together. There was comfort in it, and fondness, and underneath it all a quivering want, a desire which never quite stopped, which Brienne was starting to recognize (you, you, you).

Brienne could taste tobacco, the bacon they had all had for breakfast, the faint vapor of paint which always clung to him and, underneath it all, Jaime. Her skin felt deliciously covered in pins and needles, her hands slid up Jaime’s neck and into his hair. She did not care that it was almost lunchtime and anyone could walk in and see them. When Jaime shifted a little and pushed his thigh between her legs, lifting the blue skirt up her knees and thighs, worn corduroy gliding scratchily against her bare legs, she started, more in surprise than fear, before she leaned shyly then eagerly into the novel touch, a feeling like fingertips prodding gently between her legs. She moaned, was momentarily horrified by how loud it sounded, and Jaime broke off the kiss, held her at bay, eyes hooded.

“You’re too young,” he said, his voice as shivery as Brienne felt.

He was always breaking away from her, kissing her then holding her back, looking at her then pretending he hadn’t been looking. She couldn’t help laughing a little, desperate to kiss him some more. “I wasn’t too young in the park.”

*I wasn’t too young when you were watching me in secret*, she wanted to say but didn’t.

He shook his head as though to clear it of a hangover. “And we’re cousins,” he muttered, not meeting her eye.

She stroked his hair, his ear, his jaw gently with her fingers, their tips tingling, felt him clench his teeth and swallow under her touch, felt his shoulder tense under her other hand. His hands were still on her waist, her hips.

“Jaime,” she said, slightly exasperated because he needed the self-evident spelled out to him. “I know I’m… inexperienced, and not pretty, but I’m not a baby. And yes, we are cousins. But it’s not like we are brother and sister.”

That part was obvious. It was also entirely the wrong thing to say.

Brienne knew it, though she did not know why, as soon as she saw Jaime’s face change. His features, hesitant and desirous and halfway convinced, suddenly walled her out as though an iron door had slammed shut before her outstretched arms. He pushed her away, so she stumbled and went down on one knee. Before she could pull herself up, he stormed past her and out of the shop, the bell jangling in protest, the door slamming with a crunch of wood and a rattle of glass behind him.

“Jaime!” Brienne half wailed, half sobbed, but he was already gone.

“Lunch! Dumplings in stew!” Sansa shrieked from the kitchen, banging an empty pot with a spoon like an improvised gong. A moment later Pod came tripping up the stairs from the workroom.

He stopped, his face a puzzle of confusion and concern when he saw Brienne crouched on the floor, her face red and her eyes waterlogged. She gathered herself together and stood, gave Pod a smile which was both reassurance and a plea for silence, and preceded the boy into the dining room, holding back tears, feeling still the sensation of Jaime’s thigh between her legs, the slight pressure which had both unsettled her and made her want to attend to it, fan its flames and see where it would
take her.

Chapter End Notes

What’s eating Jaime Lannister, you ask? All shall be revealed soon.
Winter was the season of measles and influenzas, head-colds and mumps and other childhood diseases. The newspapers carried reports of greyscale in rural areas, but there were none in the city. Instead, Dornish measles cut a wide swath through the young of King’s Landing, even killing some infants and toddlers in Fleabottom.

The three Tarth children had been inoculated against most communicable diseases, but Dornish measles could still give one a nasty fever, even with acquired immunity. So Brienne was not overly concerned when Sansa came down with a fever and a dry cough. Pod didn’t, seemingly protected by the sawdust clogging his nose and mouth after long days in the workroom. Tysha nursed Sansa in Tyrion’s room, even sleeping with the girl on the dwarf’s bed. She couldn’t stand the idea of Sansa waking in the night wanting a cold compress or a drink of water, and Tysha not being there to fetch it for her. She also watched out for Sansa’s thumb-sucking, which had fallen off gradually under Tysha and Brienne’s watchful eye.

The whole house was in a bit of an uproar, Tywin’s temper running even shorter than usual. With his bed unceremoniously commandeered for the nursing of a sick child, Tyrion had to sleep on the couch in the back parlor, Brienne had her and Sansa’s room all to herself, while Tywin slept alone in the bed he normally shared with his not-wife. Only Pod and Jaime’s sleeping arrangements were not disturbed.

Jaime had not spoken to Brienne since the day they kissed in the shop, nor did he look at her across the dining-room table any more. She felt raw and chafed whenever he was around, even though they now actively avoided each other, rather than simply making sure not to be alone in a room together. She could not puzzle out what she had done to upset him, make him slam shut like he had. Waking up in the morning, looking at herself in the green-speckled bathroom mirror like a frog looking at its reflection in a pond, she told herself it didn’t matter, he was just a stupid boy and she didn’t care about his feelings. But going to bed in the evening, without even the reassurance of Sansa’s steady breathing for company, Brienne ached for him, for his smiles, his words, his mouth. Her thighs felt as though someone had flayed the uppermost layer of skin off them, and Brienne took a very long time settling down to sleep.

The third day of December was a Wednesday, and Sansa’s fever had finally broken around teatime. Since Tywin was away at one of his business meetings in the city, they celebrated Sansa’s imminent recovery with blueberry scones and oceans of sweet tea for supper. Later that evening, Brienne was in the kitchen with Tyrion. She was drying and putting away mugs, soothed by the rhythmic, mindless activity, while Tyrion changed the strings on his fiddle. Pod was in his crow’s nest working on a ship no longer than his middle finger, which he was going to fold into a bottle Tywin had given him two days earlier as a special challenge. Tysha was giving Sansa a sponge bath in Tyrion’s room. Jaime and Dog were nowhere to be seen.

Brienne had finally gotten around to asking Tyrion about Bonfire Night.

“It’s a festival of R’hillor, the Lord of Light,” he explained in his worldly way, like he was reading from a book. “It takes place a few nights before Winter’s Eve, clearly as a challenge to the Faith of the Seven. It involves the building and lighting of large bonfires, as the name suggests, and people can bring out old things from their homes and throw them on the bonfires, a way to cleanse their lives of old hurts, wrongs and regrets. The idea is to keep the bonfires burning till dawn, so a lot of
old junk tends to get cleared out.”

“Till dawn,” Brienne mused. “For the night is dark and full of terrors, right?”

Tyrion grinned up at her. “Correct. If the bonfires keep burning till dawn, good things will happen in the coming year, or that’s the principle of it at least. You know Mr. Florent our kindly neighborhood sweet-seller is a devotee of R’hllor? Of course you do, observant girl like you. If he doesn’t organize a bonfire in the square, I’m not a dwarf. Still,” he shrugged, “it makes one night of midwinter less cold, and it’s good fun for the children.”

Brienne put the last mug away and attacked the mound of wet cutlery with her drying cloth. She opened the cutlery drawer to start stacking, and saw a freshly severed hand.

Brienne squeezed her eyes shut, counted to five, looked again.

The hand looked soft and plump, with little pink nails and a thin silver band on the fourth finger. A little girl’s hand, dried blood crusted on the ragged flesh of the wrist, where it had been roughly severed from the arm. It looked still warm, though not alive, resting between the knife tray and the soup ladle.

“Um,” Brienne said, a choked-off noise rather than a word.

“What is it?” Tyrion asked absently, testing a string. It produced a sound like a woman wailing in the distance.

Brienne backed away from the drawer, dropping her dish cloth. Her hip met the edge of the table with a bone-jarring lance of pain. She hissed and doubled over, squeezed her eyes shut against the tears which wanted out.

“Brienne?” Tyrion’s small hand patted her knee. She hadn’t even heard him climb off his chair. He frowned at her with concern. “What is it?”

“There’s something in the knife drawer,” Brienne rasped, too terrified to worry about sounding ridiculous. “Something bleeding.”

Tyrion’s mismatched eyes lent his dubious expression a special intensity. Despite his obvious skepticism, he waddled up to the open cutlery drawer, lifted himself awkwardly on tiptoe, and peered in. Brienne bit her fist, anticipating his cry of terror.

He couldn’t reach inside the drawer, so he shook it instead. Metal rattled and clinked inside. “There are knives, forks, several sizes of spoon, a ladle, a cheese grater, and other objects Tysha would know, which all look like instruments of torture to me. What did you see?”

What did you see? Not: what do you think you saw? Brienne loved him for that, even as she shivered with the certainty that she couldn’t have seen it because it couldn’t be real and she was just scaring herself.

“A hand,” she whispered, one hand clutching her aching hip, the other steadying her against the table. “A hand, cut off at the wrist.” With little pink nails. It might be Sansa’s hand in a few years’ time.

Tyrion looked again. “No hands here. Were you maybe thinking of Jaime’s injury when you opened the drawer?”

Brienne shook her head, pulled out a chair and sat down, her hip throbbing dully, evilly.
Tyrion’s voice was gentle. “But you were thinking about Jaime?”

Brienne was so much taller than Tyrion that even sitting down she could not hide her face from him, but she tried nonetheless, bowing her head, her neck and ears burning. Tyrion pulled out the chair next to hers and clambered up onto it.

“It’s all right, Brienne,” he soothed. “I’m certainly not one to judge. But I think you should know one of the reasons my big brother has not been as... nice to you as he could have been.” He paused, considering, while Brienne cringed inwardly at the memory of her first morning in the house, flinging the words ‘nice’ and ‘nasty’ at Jaime like frozen snowballs. “Maybe the biggest reason,” Tyrion added.

Brienne massaged her hip, kept silent and still.

“This is not something that gets talked about in this house,” Tyrion explained. “You may have noticed we Lannisters have a knack for that: not talking about things. But you care for Jaime and he cares for you, so you should know that when Jaime was born he had a twin. A sister.”

Tyrion paused again, mulling over the old words, the old hurt.

“She didn’t live. Something about the lungs, she wasn’t strong enough. She died, and Jaime lived. And our dear father never forgave him for it, though Jaime was but a newborn himself. Maybe as we grew and became a disappointment to him, Tywin decided a golden-haired, beautiful daughter would have looked up to him, listened to him. The child of his dreams, not troublesome flesh and blood which thinks for itself and talks back. All this we found out after our mother died birthing me, you understand. Tywin would get drunk and rail at us, call us murderers, demonspawn, kinslayers. It was not,” he smiled sardonically, “the most pleasant way to grow up. I’ve dealt with it in my own ways, and Jaime... I don’t think he knows how to be kind without being horrible about it. Or how to ask for kindness without biting the hand that would pet him, proverbially speaking.”

Brienne was worrying her lower lip with her teeth. A sister. A golden twin. Unlike most people, Jaime did not come into this world alone, yet he was condemned to go through life alone, without his other half. With a father who thought the wrong twin had died, and never let Jaime forget his failings, real or imagined.

A sister, a twin, a twin sister. The words chased each other round and round Brienne’s head like trained circus mice. Also: We are cousins, but it’s not like we are brother and sister. Would he have preferred that, for Brienne to be his own flesh, beautiful and golden and cruel, like him, rather than the tall, lumpy, love-struck girl she was?

He cares for you.

Tyrion felt her forehead, whistled through his teeth. “No wonder you’re seeing chopped-off hands in kitchen drawers. You’re burning up."

“I am?”

“Oh yes, and not just with love for my brother.”

Brienne winced as though he had slapped her, relaxed when she saw the gently teasing grin and the genuine kindness on Tyrion’s face. He was giving her a way out of the thorny thicket his words had grown around her. She could escape up to her room and think things through under cover of going to bed early with a fever. She did feel a little hot, and not just from blushing.

“I should finish drying the cutlery,” Brienne muttered stubbornly.
Tyrion waved this away. “I’ll get Jaime to do it. You need to rest.”

Brienne made herself take one last look in the drawer and confirm that, indeed, no severed hand waited for her there, blood congealing on the regged remnant of its wrist. Tyrion insisted on accompanying her upstairs, despite her protests that if she felt faint he could hardly catch her before she tumbled down the stairs. Brienne went to her room, while Tyrion went to Jaime’s door and knocked. Brienne shut her door behind her, not wanting the temptation to eavesdrop on the brothers’ conversation.

She had changed into her pajamas, which were even shorter and tighter than they had been in September, when someone knocked and opened the door without waiting for her to answer.

She was not surprised to see Jaime. He had already seen her naked, it would not have occurred to him to wait for permission to enter.

“Tyrion said you felt faint,” he said, lingering in the doorway. Brienne saw Tyrion cross the landing and go down the stairs behind Jaime’s back. Tyrion did not look at Brienne, an expression of patently false innocence on his face.

“I’m just running a fever,” Brienne replied, clutching the front of her pajama jacket to her chest even though it was buttoned all the way to her throat. Her hip throbbed spitefully. “I must have picked it up from Sansa. I’ll be fine.”

Jaime nodded, seemingly satisfied, but then he stepped into Brienne’s room and closed the door behind him. “I’ll sit with you until you fall asleep,” he said.

She sputtered. “I’m fine, Jaime. There’s no need for you to…”

He cut her off. “Brienne, get under the covers before you freeze or I’ll get you under them myself.”

She got under her duvet, blushing. He was forever telling her what to do, and she was forever doomed to obey him, it seemed.

Jaime switched off the ceiling light so only a little light came in through the window from the alley outside. Brienne burrowed under her duvet till only her eyes and hair showed, clutching Bear to her side, watching Jaime warily, a sleek great cat in the night.

He fetched the chair she used to block the hole in their wall without comment, brought it to the head of Brienne’s bed, and sat down on it. He immediately lit a cigarette. The tip was a glowing star in the dark room, poised between his long fingers. He tapped ash on the floor and crossed his left ankle over his right knee, seemingly content not to speak for once.

Brienne could not stand the silence between them. Since she’d started living with the Lannisters, she found it more and more difficult to move through the day in silence, as she had often been wont to do on Tarth. Back then, silence had been a wall of ice and stone she could erect between herself and the world. Now, silence called to mind Tywin, his ever-looming presence, his air of menace, of barely contained fury. Silence boded ill, Brienne had come to learn. Jaime could shut down conversations faster than anyone else she knew, but she lacked the patience and the temperament for subtlety.

“Jaime,” she said, her voice tinny and hollow in the nighttime room. “Why did you drill that hole in the wall?”

She thought he would not answer her. Finally he took a large mouthful of smoke and replied while exhaling it, as though hoping the smoke would smother the sound of his voice. “Because I wanted to look at you.”
Brienne shifted, rolled onto her side so she was facing his profile, trying to make the metal springs under her mattress not squeak. “But why?” she persisted.

Jaime sighed, long-suffering. “Because you’re shaped like a tree trunk, and you’ve got thin ugly hair, and a broad ugly face, and pretty eyes. And you’d have beaten me bloody if I’d asked you to strip, for purposes of artistic modeling, of course.” He paused, raised the cigarette to his lips. “Because I wanted to.”

“Oh.” Brienne felt battered by his insults and his sincerity, warmed by his words, his voice, his presence in her room.

“Yes. Oh.”

A sister, her fevered brain muttered. A twin sister. Cousins, not brother and sister. He cares for you. What isn’t dangerous in this life?

She reached out from under the duvet, fumbled for his free hand, his right hand, whole and alive, still swathed in bandages. Leaned out from the bed and kissed it, her mouth landing on grimy bandages and cold knuckles.

She could hear him smile, though he tried to keep his voice level. “So you’ve figured out Tyrion and Tysha, have you?”

Brienne did not let go of his hand, warmed his chilled fingers with her own, bed-warm ones. “I’ve figured out they love each other. Not why she abides Tywin. Or why Tyrion does, for that matter.”

The chair creaked as Jaime shifted. *It seems to be a night for telling family secrets*, Brienne thought when he began to speak.

“Tysha came to help out at the shop two Winter’s Eves past, just for the few weeks when we have the most customers. Tyrion was sixteen and had never so much as kissed a girl. She was two years older and lovely and sang like a bird, and looked at him like he was six feet tall. She wanted them to run away together, maybe to Dorne, maybe across the Narrow Sea. Father put a stop to that. He has made unique toys, expensive toys, one of a kind, for the children of every city potentate. A few words from him, and Tysha would have been imprisoned as a harlot and Tyrion as a whoremonger, both branded for life. It was Tysha’s idea, believe it or not – she offered Tywin herself in exchange for Tyrion’s safety. I don’t think she expected to wake in Father’s bed with her voice gone. Or for him to cut off all her hair. He made sure she was too ashamed to leave the house for weeks. Didn’t kill what she feels for Tyrion, though. Or he for her.”

Jaime’s hand had absorbed some of Brienne’s warmth, his fingers long and slender in her longer, thicker ones. “So,” she said slowly. “Tyrion lost a lover, you a sister, you both a mother, and your father a wife. You all stay here, like… flies in a spider’s web. And now Pod and Sansa and I have become ensnared in it as well.”

Jaime did not move. Brienne prayed to the Seven she had not misjudged in mentioning his sister.

“You three can still get out,” he said finally, his voice taut. “Father doesn’t quite own you yet.”

Brienne shook her head on her pillow, even though he couldn’t see it. “We all make sacrifices for the people we love.” She squeezed his fingers, so he’d know she didn’t just mean Pod and Sansa.

Jaime pulled his hand out of hers, bent down and kissed her temple, his lips cool and moist on her fevered skin, her pillow dipping where he leaned on the bed. “Go to sleep, Brienne,” he whispered. He kissed her ear for good measure, lingered a long moment before he withdrew, as though he were
considering exploring the convoluted shape of her ear with his tongue. Brienne shivered. “If you’re still feeling sick tomorrow, there’ll be no one capable of washing the amount of dirty dishes we generate.”

Brienne snorted with exasperated fondness, and despite her mind still sifting through everything she had learned that night, soon enough she slept. When she awoke in the morning, her brow cool and her muscles fever-achy, Jaime was gone, the only traces of his presence the chair by her bed, the naked hole in the wall, and a scattering of cold ashes on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

Bonfire Night, also known as Guy Fawkes Night, is celebrated on November 5, but for plot-related reasons, and since I am filching it for my own ends anyway, I moved it to late December – to a few days before Winter’s Eve, which is the Westerosi equivalent of Christmas, invented by me, not sanctioned by GRRM or any of his parent companies and subsidiaries.

I considered titling this chapter “Lannister Info Dump” but decided “Lost and Found” has a nicer ring to it.
A few days after the night of the fever, Sansa was up and about, back to her old self, and so was Brienne, or near as. She was washing the breakfast dishes, and Tysha was drying. When Brienne picked up her mug, Tysha stopped her hand, peered at the pattern formed by tea leaves and melted sugar on the bottom of the mug, then rushed over to the blackboard.

‘A ship,’ she wrote. ‘That means a journey.’

“For me?” Brienne asked, amused. She was moored and tethered to the shop and this house and the people in it, for better or worse. She couldn’t imagine going anywhere ever again.

‘For someone.’

The vagueness of it was ominous. Brienne sank her arms into warm, soapy water up to the elbows, and scrubbed. She noticed Tysha waving to get her attention.

‘There is to be a performance this afternoon.’

It was Sunday, the shop was always closed on Sundays, but that didn’t give anyone any respite. Tywin kept Jaime and Pod busy in the workroom, Tyrion almost always had a gig, and Brienne and Tysha had mending, cleaning, cooking, other womanly duties. Then, of course, there was the dreaded Sunday tea, the ceremony of the necklace, the quiet horror of it all. And after tea, Tywin would take Tysha upstairs to…

“What do you mean, a performance?” Brienne asked, hoping Tysha would not notice her blush.

‘Puppets. A puppet show. We must all go and admire the puppets. It is special because you three haven’t seen them before.’

I’ve seen them before, Brienne thought. On her first morning Jaime had shown her the workroom, and she had seen the puppets hanging on the walls like the bodies of enemies a noble House might have hung from its castle walls in days of old. Headless, hairless, faceless, some of them complete and perfect in their ornate costumes, with wigs made out of Tysha’s midnight-black hair. Brienne had stopped Jaime showing her the small theatre, hadn’t wanted to see more then, didn’t want to see more now.

‘It is terribly important to him!!!’

Oh well. That settled it in this house. Maybe the performance would go on past teatime, which wouldn’t be a bad thing at all.

After a lunch of roast chicken and potatoes, Tywin and Jaime vanished downstairs to prepare everything for the performance, while Tysha made sure the Tarth children were presentable. All of Brienne’s nice clothes were trousers and sweaters, so she wore her chocolate-brown sweater and the paisley skirt Tysha had made for her as the most festive one, because Tysha insisted they should all dress up for the occasion.

Tysha herself put on her grey dress. Brienne’s heart sank. She expected nothing good to come of the afternoon after she saw Tysha dressed as on any other Sunday, in preparation for the ceremony of
the golden choker after the puppet show. She wondered if Tywin made her keep the choker on while he…

Tysha did not seem to notice Brienne’s anxiety and discomfort. She combed out Sansa’s long hair, made sure there were no stains on a pretty floral frock, a survivor of Tarth, which still fit the little girl. Tysha took a wet flannel to Pod’s face and ears, despite his protestations that he had washed already that morning, checked the elbows of his sweater for holes, his socks for cleanliness.

Tyrion appeared, dressed in his best suit, with a carnation in his buttonhole and his fiddle case under his arm.

“Where did you find a carnation in December?” Brienne asked him.

He winked at her, looking exactly like Jaime for a moment, and kissed Tysha’s fingers, making her giggle soundlessly. Sansa’s face fell when she realized he only had the one flower, so Tyrion graciously took the carnation out of his buttonhole and tucked it into Sansa’s hair, making her beam and dance and hug him. Even Pod, miles away on a sailboat in his mind, laughed at that.

The moment of warmth and levity was ruined when Tyrion led Tysha to the stairs which took them down to the workroom. The basement room seemed to swallow them, brightly lit as it was. Brienne and the children followed. Dog brought up the rear with the look of a dog performing a solemn duty.

The workroom looked much the same, except that its floor was freshly swept, and four chairs were set up in front of the red plush curtains at its end. Brienne, Tysha and the children took their seats while Tyrion stood to the side and opened his fiddle case. Jaime and Tywin could be heard moving about behind the curtains. At one point Jaime emerged, looking tense and preoccupied, switched off the overhead lights, darted back. Brienne guessed this would be an occasion when Tywin let him work the strings, which only increased her sense of foreboding. The dolls and puppets watched from the walls, brooding in their headless, eyeless, naked and dressed, all-knowing silence.

The only light in the room now came from the small window at street level and the stage lights behind the curtains, which lent the room a ruddy glow with none of the warmth of firelight. Everything was still behind the curtains at last, then Tywin’s voice rang out like a death knell.

“Play your blasted fiddle, Tyrion! Do you think I want you here as a stage ornament?”

Tyrion made a face for the benefit of the audience, but he struck up a jaunty yet stately tune, the sort of tune lords and ladies might pair off to after a feast at court. The red curtains parted to reveal a set painted like a stone room bathed in artificial golden sunlight, with a cardboard throne set in its middle, at the top of three broad, shallow stairs. Brienne recognized it for a fairly good replica of the infamous Iron Throne, painted no doubt by Jaime with his customary precision and attention to detail.

As soon as the curtains opened, Tysha started clapping with forced enthusiasm, and very, very loudly. Brienne got the hint and clapped as well, followed by Sansa (delighted to join in on the fun) and Pod (slowest to begin, quietest to clap).

“An historical sequence,” Tywin intoned from somewhere above the stage in his sonorous voice, a born, if solemn, master of revels. “Aemon Targaryen the Dragonknight and Queen Naerys enjoy a secret tryst.”

A puppet entered from the right. She was as tall as Tysha, had long hair made of silk thread the color of moonlight woven into an elaborate coiffure, and wore a black velvet dress with a long train. She moved to the middle of the stage smoothly, her wooden feet making a clack-clacking noise on the
equally wooden stage. Brienne felt uneasy watching the graceful, dead thing move, and so occupied herself wondering how the crawlspace Tywin and Jaime were crouching in could possibly fit in the workroom, between the theatre set, which was a bit taller than Brienne, and the ceiling.

On the stage, the Naerys puppet ascended the three shallow stairs, her foot wavering only for a moment over the third one, and sat herself on the Iron Throne. Brienne was certain that was wrong, that only queens who ruled in their own right were ever allowed to do that, not queens consort, but Tysha let out an almost audible sigh of relief when she saw the puppet accomplish its ascent without a hitch. Tysha clapped again, just as loudly as before, and Brienne joined her, a bit more hesitantly.

Then the Dragonknight entered from the left. He was taller than his sister-lover, and dressed in tin armor painted white. A tinpot knight. Brienne would have giggled, had it not been utterly impossible to do so in that room, in that house, in that moment.

The Dragonknight moved more tentatively than the Naerys puppet, as though uncertain of what walking actually entailed, his footsteps an awkward cross between a shuffle and a dance. Even before she heard the seismic rumble from above, Brienne guessed Jaime was working the Dragonknight’s strings. He was nowhere near as sure a puppet-master as his father. Tywin must have only consented to use Jaime because he could not work two large puppets performing such complex gestures alone.

“Lovers’ meeting,” Tywin intoned irritably, as though they were all as little as Sansa and needed the obvious explained to them.

Naerys rose from the throne and descended the three stairs, extending her arms to Aemon. He raised his arms in turn. They met in the center of the stage and embraced, their wooden heads clicking against each other with a sound like a woodpecker building a nest. They clung together desperately, stiff yet somewhat lifelike, while Tysha and Brienne clapped and clapped till Brienne’s palms burned with the effort. Tyrion’s tune had modulated into a more tragic cadence, fit for a stolen moment between lovers whose passion was forbidden and dangerous.

The puppets’ embrace went on for a long time. Brienne’s heart was beating painfully, her breath came short and labored. Something was wrong. The puppets thrashed together, as though wrestling or fucking (Brienne gasped inwardly at the word, spoken in Jaime’s voice inside her head). This was not in the script. Tywin’s rumble of rage rose in pitch as it became obvious the puppets’ strings were hopelessly entangled.

Tysha stopped clapping and cringed in her chair. Sansa whimpered and clung to Tysha, who embraced her as though Tysha’s skinny body could shield the girl from an imminent calamity. Dog barked, once. Brienne sat motionless and horrified. Pod was miles away in the middle of the Sunset Sea, sailing toward the edge of the world.

With a screech of rending wire, Aemon separated himself violently from his royal sister-lover and tottered backwards, out of control, most of his wires ruined. He fell down, on his back on the stage, his head and armor knocking hollowly against the boards, while Naerys slumped before him, her wooden legs spread wantonly, her arms gone slack, her wires damaged as well. Tyrion stopped playing.

The silence was punctuated by Sansa’s sniffling, then was rent by Jaime’s laughter, clear as a bronze bell, irrepressible as a gushing torrent.

A heavy blow sounded from above, a thunderclap of flesh on flesh. Jaime’s laughter turned into a scream of terror and pain as he fell from the hidden crawlspace and struck the stage, sprawled out over the Aemon puppet, on his back, his limbs splayed. He fell gracelessly and heavily, with a dull,
soul-jarring thump, not at all as he had fallen that day in his room while Brienne watched, for show, with lots of noise and no damage done.

Brienne was on her feet and up on the stage before she realized what she was doing. She knew she shouldn’t touch a wounded person lest she made their condition worse, but she could not not touch him. She tentatively laid a hand on his shoulder. “Jaime.”

He groaned and tried to move away from her touch. She saw that he was bleeding from a cut over one eye, where Tywin must have struck him. Behind Brienne, Sansa was screaming and Dog was barking, at first very loudly and then more quietly as Pod grabbed his little sister and ran upstairs with her, followed by Dog and urged on silently by Tysha, who stood wringing her hands impotently. Tyrion stood beside her, squeezing his fiddle bow fit to break it in two.

Brienne tried again, put both hands on Jaime’s shoulders and tried to roll him over to face her. “Jaime, please.” Jaime shrank from her, rolling off of the Aemon puppet and curling into a ball.

The Naerys puppet lifted off the stage and flew through the air as far as the Iron Throne, where she sat down and went limp. Then Tywin came onto the stage, completely unruffled. “He’s never working my lovely puppets again,” he declared with absolute finality. “Useless. Ruined my Dragonknight.”

Tywin picked up the Aemon puppet, tenderly inspected its torn wires, the dents and scuffs on its tin armor, as though inspecting a crying child for a scrape or a bruise. When he was done, he looked straight at Brienne, who still crouched beside the unresponsive, shivering Jaime, and glared at Tywin.

“Keep looking at me like that, I’ll pluck both your eyes out and use them for my puppets,” Tywin said. “They’re pretty enough to be made of glass. Although,” he cocked his head slowly, examining Brienne with chilling, practical calm. “Now there’s a thought,” he mused. “Puppets and people on the same stage. A true novelty. Though you’re big, girl, Tysha must feed you extra. But I can use you. You will act with my puppets.”

“Gods, no!” Tyrion exclaimed, his voice dry and choked.

“No, please,” Tysha mouthed wordlessly.

“Damn you,” Jaime groaned, tried to rise, his arms trembling as he supported himself on them, and coughed up a mouthful of blood. “I’ll kill you first.”

Tywin paid them no mind, as though being thus threatened and defied were an everyday occurrence. They were all powerless against him, and he knew it.

“No,” Brienne said slowly, holding Tywin’s gaze, though it made her quake inside. “I won’t.” She put her arms around Jaime and rose, supporting his weight, grunting and swaying for balance. He shook and moaned with pain, but he found his feet after a second and stood beside her, his head down, trembling.

“Yes,” Tywin said, icy, certain. “You will. Or you and your loud sister and that one,” he indicated Jaime with a careless wave of the hand which was not holding the Aemon puppet as tenderly as Brienne supported Jaime, “can all go sleep on a bench and freeze. It will be a long winter.”

Tysha made a noiseless noise at the thought of little Sansa outside in the cold, turned out by Tywin like a mangy dog.

“So choose,” Tywin said to Brienne. “Choose.”
Brienne wanted to kill him. She could feel the impulse in her hands, with which she held Jaime gently, so gently around the torso and under the armpits, knew that this was how people made spur-of-the-moment, irrevocable choices. She and Tywin stared at each other, and neither would allow themselves to be stared down.

Finally Brienne looked down and away, and helped Jaime off the stage. He limped like an old man, and his breathing was ragged. Tysha and Tyrion were instantly there, more for moral support than for their ability to hold Jaime up better than Brienne was doing.

Tywin made not a sound behind them, but Brienne imagined him smiling a chilly little smile with his false teeth and bright pink gums. She could not decide if she was a coward or a fool or just trying to protect those she loved, but she knew Tywin only loved his puppets, and so he had already won.

Chapter End Notes

There's a petition going around to have Tywin Lannister expelled from the Puppeteers’ Union of Westeros for unethical and dangerous behavior.
After he fell, Jaime stopped grinning.

Although he had bitten his tongue when he struck the stage, his mouth filling with blood, and Tywin’s blow had cut him just above his right eyebrow, he had miraculously suffered no other injuries. But he changed. The grace went out of his movements, his endless stream of sarcasm and humor and charm dried up. He stopped shaving, even occasionally, the wildly sprouting beard giving him the look of someone older, more feral. He barely spoke, he scarcely ate. He spent mealtimes glaring at his father with fierce, murderous eyes, green lakes frozen over, never to melt again. Tywin ignored him or basked in his son’s rage, giving nothing away, like a lizard in the sun.

Brienne grew quietly frantic. If the old Jaime, quick and cruel and slippery-tongued, had unnerved her and moved her, this one cut her heart to shreds. She ached to look at him as he was now. She would have given her right arm to have things as they were before, when if Jaime acted sullen or resentful around her likely as not she was the cause, and all she needed to do was draw him out or fight with him or kiss him to redress the balance. But this new Jaime barely seemed to notice her presence across the supper table, her blue eyes imploring. He barely noticed any of them. Tysha could not get through to him with her nervous warmth, and neither could Tyrion, for all his words.

Sansa tried to get Jaime to play with her once. He just walked past her and kept going, deaf to her sobs.

The magic circle of people living in that gloomy house – everyone against Tywin – was broken. Jaime and Pod and Tywin still spent their time in the workroom, working even Wednesday afternoons and Sunday evenings now that Winter’s Eve was almost upon them. In a house full of toys, Sansa’s broken doll broke irreparably and could not be replaced, for Tywin would not allow it.

Tysha sat in the kitchen until they all went to bed well after midnight, claiming that one of the men downstairs might need a cup of tea or something. Brienne knew this was a lie, but did not hold it against Tysha, for she herself had taken to sitting with Tyrion in his tiny room behind the back parlor. It was unimaginable that they might join Tysha in the kitchen, and she might bring out her flute and play with Tyrion while Brienne listened. Instead, Tyrion tuned his fiddle listlessly, and Brienne sat on his bed, barely big enough for her to curl up on, and helped Tysha with the sewing. Or at least she tried: her thick fingers were hopeless with any but the longest needles, and all her stitches were crooked. She could only mend socks, other small things which would not be seen.

*I’m as useless at sewing as at everything else*, she thought while she tried to darn, and Tyrion tried to play, and Tysha sat in the kitchen alone after she put Sansa to bed, all of them waiting for the inevitable: for Tywin to attack, maybe even murder Jaime. Sullen, acid-tongued, always there at the table or at his painting bench, the bandages gone from his healing right hand, Jaime invited his father’s wrath with his very presence. Or maybe it would be Jaime who struck first, the blackness inside him boiling over at last to drown his father and swallow them all up. One way or the other, it was only a matter of time.

Brienne suspected it would be Tywin who struck first. She raged against Jaime for giving up like that, setting things up so that Tywin would sooner or later snap and attack him, and leave the rest of them all alone against Tywin’s might and fury, without Jaime’s lithe strength, his clever, mocking words to buoy them up. Sometimes she could still see Jaime in her mind’s eye, dancing like a living flame, feel his mouth on hers, his tongue caressing hers, questioning, wanting. But it was as though none of that had ever happened, she had only imagined it.

She had even broken down and moved the chair in her room, knelt on the hard floorboards and put
her eye to the hole in the wall, hoping for a glimpse of Jaime painting or walking on his hands or something. Brienne had overheard boys back on Tarth talk about pleasuring themselves, had pieced together what that entailed from their lewd but vague jests and an anatomy book owned by her father. She would have been grateful to see Jaime doing that, his naked back glistening with sweat while his hand moved frantically, could have told herself he was still Jaime, angry and alive, that maybe all was not yet lost. But all she saw through the spy-hole was his outline in the dark, sitting on his bed, his back against the wall, arms hanging loose over his bent knees, the glow of his cigarette the only light in the world. He never seemed to sleep any more, and Brienne grew dark-eyed and taut-skinned with sleeplessness as well.

The world moved on around them, and Winter’s Eve approached like an invading army. Tysha and Brienne were run off their feet serving customers, endlessly displaying toys, demonstrating how the mechanical ones worked, wrapping, closing the till, heavy with money. One of the boats Pod made went on sale, the price set at five gold dragons. Brienne put it in the shop window, although Tywin never told her to, and it sold within a day, bringing a rare flush of happiness to all of the Tarth children and Tysha, and even Tyrion smiled at the news. Bran the Shipwright’s boat with its paired animals went as well at fifty gold dragons, to a woman with a Highgarden accent, dressed in an elegant trouser suit. Brienne served her, fumbling with the wrapping paper, nervous lest Tywin came upstairs and chased the woman away with shouts of ‘harlot’ and ‘unnatural.’ But he stayed below, in his natural domain, and the woman smiled at Brienne with the condescending pity the beautiful mete out to the ugly before she took her purchase away, tottering on her high heels across the square, its cobblestones rimed with frost.

‘Your uncle doesn’t believe in celebrating Winter’s Eve,’ Tysha wrote on the blackboard one bitterly cold morning.

*Of course he doesn’t,* Brienne thought morosely. He hadn’t even allowed Pod and Sansa to put on costumes and go door to door asking for sweets on the Feast of Old Gods. Tysha had baked the children a chocolate cake to make up for it, but it hadn’t been the same.

‘But I am sewing presents for you all,’ Tysha hastened to add with a tremulous, watery smile. ‘And there’s to be a special puppet show, the day after Bonfire Night.’

“Because not only does he not care about Winter’s Eve or the Seven, he wants to spite R’hllor as well. Show him the night may end but Tywin Lannister can still work his will on the world,” Brienne murmured, not realizing she was speaking out loud. They were all fraying at the edges from the tension in the house.

Tysha burst into silent tears. Startled out of her self-absorption, Brienne hugged the older girl, as frail and hollow-boned as a bird in Brienne’s arms. Brienne felt as big and strong as she always had, but she was no longer certain that her strength alone could carry her through whatever was rolling their way, a boulder thundering down a mountain with all of them in its path.

Tysha wriggled out of Brienne’s arms and wrote: ‘He wants you to be in the show.’

“Oh. Right.”

Brienne had grown so distracted with the shop and Jaime and everything, she had managed to put the prospect of acting with Tywin’s puppets out of her mind. Now she imagined herself being stared at by everyone, stabbed and lacerated by their kindly, pitying eyes, enacting gods knew what ghastliness while Tywin jerked her strings from above.

‘He won’t harm you. You are his sister’s child.’
Brienne fixed Tysha with a kind eye. “He’s harmed all of us already.”

Tysha’s face crumpled but she did not cry again, just nodded, once, resigned. It was far too late to pretend otherwise.

Sometimes, while serving customers, Brienne daydreamed. She imagined that Tywin was not actually her mother’s brother, but a wicked stranger who had killed the real Tywin Lannister and taken his place, stolen his life, his sons, his house, even his skin. She imagined that some of her father’s relatives were still alive, and she and her siblings had gone to live with them instead. Then they would have had a proper Winter’s Eve celebration, lived in a warm, snug house far from this city, been safe.

At that point the fantasy always broke down, for had the Tarths gone to live somewhere else, Brienne would never have known Tyrion and Tysha and Jaime. And Jaime.

Between Tysha’s filching of the odd copper star from the housekeeping money and whatever portion of Tyrion’s earnings from his fiddling gigs Tywin did not claim, they managed to put together a small sum, which Tyrion slipped into the pocket of Brienne’s skirt one morning while she was washing the breakfast dishes.

“To buy presents for Sansa and Pod,” he said simply. Brienne had to turn away so her tears dripped into the sink unseen, tears at their kindness, so much like her late father’s, so unlike Tywin’s implacable coldness.

She bought a tin of boiled candy for Sansa, suspecting her sister would like the tin with its picture of pink and yellow butterflies even more than the candy, and a packet of handkerchiefs with the letter ‘P’ embroidered on them for Pod, who was forever misplacing handkerchiefs and sniffling in the cold workroom. For the few coins left over Brienne got a tiny bottle of perfume for Tysha, because its smell reminded her of carnations and so perhaps Tysha might like it and wear it for Tyrion, and help Brienne spite Tywin. Brienne decided to clean Tyrion’s shoes for a year, to repay him and as a kind of present.

She got nothing for Jaime, for he seemed to exist in a different country from the grey place the rest of them inhabited. It would have been hard enough to give him a small something wrapped in colorful paper and not have him sneer at it and make fun of her for a sentimental fool before. Now, he was beyond such paltry things as presents and gestures of affection. He fed on rage and hatred, and was being eaten alive.

The day before the day before Bonfire Night, when Brienne should have been out doing the family shopping and Tysha should have been making lunch, Tysha pulled Brienne into the kitchen, shut the door, and drew a length of white chiffon from a paper bag. The material was gossamer thin, transparent even in the thin wintry light coming in through the window. It shone like the hair of the painted Dog above the fireplace, and would be practically invisible under stage lights, a shimmering veil of nothingness.

‘For your costume,’ Tysha wrote on the pad she drew from her pocket, as though she were too old and tired to rise from the table and go to the blackboard. ‘For the show.’

“What am I supposed to be?” Brienne asked, eyeing the material with mounting dread, suspecting a wood nymph or a ballerina, something dainty and small. Or a young, apple-cheeked bride. The material looked like the white tulle in which her mother had swathed herself on her wedding day.

‘Queen Rhaella. The Mad King’s wife.’
The queen who had been abused by her insane, fire-obsessed brother-husband, and died giving birth to his child, an exile from her court. Brienne had a bad feeling Tywin did not want her in see-through, gossamer white in order to portray the suffering queen’s dignity and inviolability.

‘He is making the king in the shape of a dragon,’ Tysha wrote. ‘There have been problems. He says Jaime is trying to spoil it.’

This, Brienne could well believe. Perhaps Jaime was not completely lost yet. They were all silently complicit in delivering Brienne up to Tywin, swathed in white fabric, a sacrifice. Even Brienne was conspiring in her own destruction. They were all Tywin’s puppets, except maybe Jaime. Maybe. Her heart clenched and leapt at the thought, lent her the courage to contemplate the thin white fabric with something like equanimity.

“How big will the dragon be?” she asked.

Tysha gestured vaguely with her hands. It might be the size of a teapot or a chair or the whole city.

“Let’s get on with it,” Brienne muttered.

Tysha’s tape measure and scissors flashed all around her, and in no time at all the dress was roughly tacked together, a simple shift, almost a column of pure white. It left Brienne’s arms bare and fell from her broad shoulders to just above her knees. It was a lovely, young-girl dress for some lovely, innocent young girl. At least I won’t have to wear it more than once, and I’ll never outgrow it, Brienne thought bitterly.

Tysha had her strip to her white cotton smallclothes and try the dress on properly, the pins still in it scratching her goose-pimpled flesh. The kitchen was so cold they might have been north of the Wall during a Long Night. Brienne’s nipples showed dark red through the dress, raspberries on iced milk.

‘Go down now,’ Tysha scribbled on the pad, her letters lopsided with emotion. ‘So your uncle can inspect you.’

Like a cut of meat. “Must I go right now?”

‘Bonfire Night is tomorrow. The show is the day after.’

Tysha’s eyes were sad, full of terrors both known and unknown. The real Queen Rhaella must have had eyes like that, once upon a time.

Brienne kept her shoes on and shrugged into her raincoat, for the house was draughty and freezing, and she felt more naked in the white shift than had she worn nothing but her own skin and hair. The fine hairs on her arms and legs stood up like a hedgehog’s spikes. The coat was tight across her shoulders and too short over her thighs and in the sleeves, but at least it was hers. She descended the stairs to the workroom like a woman being dragged by an invisible tether to her execution.
The workroom was even colder than the rest of the house, being mostly underground and filled with Tywin’s glacial presence. The red velvet curtains were open to reveal Jaime on the stage, painting the set. It was the same basic set used for the tryst between Queen Naerys and the Dragonknight, but Jaime was making it more elaborate, more castle-like. The backdrop of stone walls seemed more solid somehow, and the throne bristled more, looked even more painful as a prospect. The simulated shadows showed red and warm, as from numerous braziers. Or a city burning outside the Red Keep. Hadn’t Aerys II burned down King’s Landing at some point in his lunatic reign?

Jaime had his back to the room, and was sketching outlines of dragon skulls on the backdrop. Brienne thought back to her history textbook and remembered the throne room in the Red Keep used to be filled with dragon skulls, they lined the room from the great door to the throne. In compressed perspective, Jaime had staggered half a dozen skulls on each side of the throne, so they seemed to be right on the edges of the proceedings. The performers on the stage were invited to the dragons’ feeding time. It chilled Brienne to see it.

Pod was not there. Tywin must have sent him out on an errand. Brienne couldn’t believe he’d simply wanted to spare the boy the sight of his sister’s nearly naked flesh.

Brienne stood just inside the door, almost crouched on the bottommost stair, and watched Tywin where he squatted in the center of the floor, a big fat golden spider in his web. A length of crimson cloth was loosely draped over a large construction of wooden slats in front of him. A pattern of stylized scales was picked out on the cloth in what gleamed in the electric light like real gold thread. Next to Tywin’s left hand was a mask, a simple human visage with empty eyes and neutral features, waiting to be fleshed out with beard and whiskers and mad, staring eyes. The face of the insane king who had expected to be reborn as a dragon, and loved to burn people alive.

“Get over here and take off that coat,” Tywin rapped out without looking up from his work.

Brienne obeyed. The cold of the room made her flesh prickle, her nipples harden. Jaime kept his back to the room, not acknowledging her presence, for which Brienne was grateful. She did not want him to see her like this, in her see-through white shift and bare legs. She covered her breasts with her crossed arms as Tywin examined her, his eyes pale green and flecked with gold, like sunshine on young spring leaves, yet with none of the warmth spring brings in its baggage train.

Tywin delivered his judgment of Brienne at last. “You’re huge. No wonder I can barely cover the food bills since you arrived.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Brienne could see Jaime’s shoulders tense up fractionally, his hand grip the paintbrush as though he wished it were a dagger. She kept her eyes on Tywin, her arms folded across her chest. Tywin had to look up at her, yet the advantage of height left Brienne for once bereft of courage or strength.

“How old are you?” Tywin demanded. “Your monthlies had better not ruin that dress.”

Brienne had to swallow before she could answer. “I turned sixteen in July.”

“You’re too big. Rhaella is supposed to look like a little girl next to her husband. The Dragon
Rampant. Big dragon, little queen. But you’re built like a horse and you gape like a cow.”

Jaime flung his paintbrush down onto the stage and turned around at last. “Don’t talk to her like that!”

_You’ve called me a cow a dozen times_, Brienne thought vaguely, as though none of this concerned her. But the cold of the room and the eyes of the two men and the myriad puppets hanging on the walls kept her anchored in her flesh, she could not escape so easily.

Tywin didn’t even look at Jaime. “Keep your tongue behind your teeth and get on with your work, Jaime.”

Jaime did not get on with his work. He stood on the stage, squeezing his fists by his sides while Tywin examined Brienne dispassionately.

“Needs must when the Stranger drives,” Tywin murmured, for his own benefit rather than Brienne’s. “Turn around.”

She turned around, shoulders hunched, arms folded. She wished Jaime would turn his back on them, go back to his painting.

“Smile.”

She smiled. Her face hurt with it.

“Not like that. Show your teeth.”

She smiled with her teeth. Tywin’s expression was pained.

“You’re nothing like your mother. You’re that father of yours, through and through. Big and rawboned and cow-eyed, the pair of you.”

Brienne wondered why he spoke of her father as though Selwyn Tarth were still alive. Tywin was still talking, his voice softer now, almost sad. The incongruity of it snagged Brienne’s attention.

“You should have seen his face when I showed up at the wedding. He thought I was going to drag Anyta away with me. But I knew it was too late. She was gone for good.”

The way he said his sister’s name lanced Brienne through the heart. She thought of her parents’ wedding photograph. Her father’s face on it had been shy, eager, happy, full of hope. The shadow of Tywin Lannister touched him not at all. But Tywin had not seen that, of course. All he had seen was his sister escaping his clutches.

_You’re making it sound like she was his captive_, Brienne had told Jaime that day in the kitchen.

_I am, aren’t I?_ had been the cryptic response.

“Walk up and down a bit.” Brienne did, arms like stone swords crossed in front of her. “Gods be good. Jaime, you show her. You used to be quite light on your feet, I seem to recall.”

The look Jaime gave his father compelled Brienne to sidle sideways so she could step between them quickly if need be, to prevent Jaime from attacking rather than to save Tywin. But all Jaime did was climb off the stage, moving like a broken doll, and trudge toward the stairs. Brienne picked up her raincoat and fled after him.

They did not speak, but when Jaime kept climbing, toward the bathroom and bedrooms, Brienne
followed without comment, tying the sash on her raincoat, tugging it closed in front. Dog came out of the kitchen and looked up at them as they climbed the stairs, the black spot on his white fur making him look like a four-legged daisy in the dim hallway.

Brienne followed Jaime into his room. He would not look at her. Sulkiness and boredom mingled on his face, as though he would rather have been downstairs, painting dragon skulls for his father.

“The performance is in two days,” he said, his voice so soft Brienne instinctively leaned in to hear better. “You won’t see the dragon beforehand, so your reactions are more realistic when you perform. I have to show you how to move, so you’ll be ready.”

“A rehearsal,” Brienne said absently, looking around the room. It looked as it had through the hole in the wall, but bigger and somehow even more empty of furniture, of life. The bed was still a mess of rumpled sheets, a small mountain of cigarette ash heaped on the windowsill above the pillow. The painting of her as a naked sword maiden was nowhere to be seen.

Jaime paced in front of her, not meeting her eye, his movements jerky. A caged lion, all his teeth and claws pulled. He was filthy with paint and lack of washing, his hair brushing his collar in wisps the color of gold muted by centuries of dirt. He seemed to begrudge every word he uttered.

“This is how it goes: Queen Rhaella is in the throne room, listening to the sounds of her husband’s enemies being burned alive off-stage. She hears a beating of wings and sees her husband approach, flush with victory. He transforms into a dragon. She tries to escape, but he bears her down to the floor.”

Brienne waited. “And then?”

“And then nothing. It’s all just to show off his dragon-king. His fucking masterpiece. Now try it. Move around as if you’re pacing, listening to the screams of people being roasted.”

She moved, echoing Jaime’s jerky movements. The fact that he was watching her made her even more self-conscious than usual, and her legs were bare and cold.

“Make it more fluid, from the hips.”

Brienne tried again, waggling her backside, uncertain what he meant. Jaime looked at her with annoyance on his unshaven, grimy face, like she was being deliberately obtuse.

“Gods, Brienne! Can you not move the way you did in the park?”

“We’re not in the park,” she snapped and bit her lip. None of this was Jaime’s fault. She had no right to shout at him.

He wouldn’t meet her eye, scuffed his foot on the floor like a young boy. Brienne wondered if Pod was back downstairs with Tywin yet.

“Let’s try the whole thing,” Jaime said quietly. “You have to run and stumble, and the dragon bears you to the floor with his enormous, majestic, scaly wings.” The flat way he said the words made them sound ludicrous rather than terrible and awe-inspiring. Brienne wanted to giggle.

Jaime paid her no mind. “You pace. I’m the dragon.” He moved his arms up and down like wings, his wrists undulating unconsciously, like the pinions of a swan or an eagle, a hint of his old grace. He made a swishing noise. “When you hear that, you worry. You run a few steps.”

Brienne ran two steps and was at the far wall of the room. Jaime ran after her, flapping his arms. It
was like playing charades with Pod and Sansa. She giggled.

“You’re meant to be frightened,” Jaime exclaimed, exasperated and getting genuinely angry.

“Oh Jaime, how am I supposed to take this seriously?”

He looked her dead in the eye for the first time in what felt like weeks, months. He reached out as though to touch her cheek, and she realized with a pang she was a full inch taller than him now. He looked so vulnerable, so lost, so reluctant, and yet she was the one wearing just a thin shift and a belted raincoat too small for her.


Brienne closed her eyes and imagined the faint heat of distant fires, the echoing screams, the shadows of dragon skulls covering her, dappling her flesh, cutting her into strips of light and blackest shadow. It helped her believe she was really there, so it was easier to act frightened and run a few steps. Her eyes still closed, she sprang away from Jaime, and lost her footing, and fell backward, clutching at him, dragging him down with her.

The floorboards were bare and cold and very hard under them. They lay, touching down the entire length of their bodies yet not really touching, faces inches apart. Brienne swallowed when she saw the hooded look in Jaime’s eyes, like he wasn’t seeing her at all and like she was all he could see. She felt a jolt of desire so pure she recognized it at once for what it was, as well as an odd, pervasive fear.

His right hand slid over her left hand where it lay on the floor by her head, fingers clutching, intertwining, brushing her cheek with his thumb. His right arm lay across her chest, heavy and muscled and sinewy, just his ratty old sweater, her thin coat and thinner dress between them. He hovered so close, she could feel his unkempt beard on her neck, scratchy and interesting, sending tiny shivers down the length of her. Her own breaths deafened her, loud as crashing waves in her skull. She turned her head away from Jaime and kissed the angry, purple, crescent-shaped scar on his palm. It’s all right, she wanted to say, though she also wanted him to reassure her. It’s all right.

Jaime exhaled so long and hard Brienne felt his hot breath like summer wind in her ear. Then he was disentangling himself from her, sitting up, his back against the bed, putting some distance between them. The look he gave her where she lay sprawled on the floor was still hooded but also amused, ironic, more like himself.

“You look ridiculous,” he said fondly.

The spell thus broken, Brienne found it possible to roll her eyes and push herself up to a sitting position, leaning back on her hands. She felt only a little sad, a little wounded at his moving away from her.

“I feel ridiculous,” she admitted, pulling down the hem of her white shift as far as it would go over her goose-pimpled legs. Had her feet been bare the effect might have been all right, but she was still wearing ankle socks and her black, everyday, lace-up shoes. “This whole thing is ridiculous.”

When Jaime did not respond, she looked up at him warily. Had she said the wrong thing again?

He was studying her, dispassionate, cool. “You know he wanted this, don’t you? I don’t think he cared if you let me or not. He wanted me to fuck you.”

Brienne gasped, closed her eyes. It was one thing to see the word in print or hear him use it with reference to things which annoyed and angered him. It was something else entirely to hear it like this,
as though he were irritated with her, angry, but also amused, warm enough to burn her fingers were she to touch him. He tried to speak coldly, to force her to face reality, but what she saw behind her closed eyes were the two of them, naked and together, glimpsed as by a light which kept winking on and off, allowing her only glimpses, making her dizzy. What she saw was raw and slightly clumsy and almost violent, like their swordfighting with branches, but also tender, inquiring, playful. It was not lovemaking. Brienne had never been able to picture herself like that with the faceless man she had imagined back on Tarth. But fucking… with Jaime… she almost could picture that.

Jaime kept talking over her silence. “He told me, ‘Go up to your room and rehearse, practice for the show.’ Yes, go up to my room and practice raping Brienne. Gods! He’s evil.”

“But why would he want that? Why should he care? He doesn’t care about either of us.”

“No, but he did care about your mother.”

He waited for Brienne to react. She didn’t. She wanted to hear what Jaime would say next.

He spoke almost gently, as though he were explaining a harsh truth of the world to a very small child. “Brienne, Tywin wanted her. Not like a sister. Like a woman. Surely you’ve figured that out by now. But she got away from him, and you are her daughter, and you look like your father, whom he despised, still despises. And Sansa is already Tysha’s, and he’s got Pod as his happy little slave, that just leaves you unaccounted for. So if I were to… and better yet, force you, and maybe put a baby in your belly, that would degrade you and ruin you, and he’d triumph.”

Yes, Brienne thought calmly, as though all this were happening to someone else, a character in a dull book she had to read for school. I did know that. Or at least I knew it just now, in the workroom, the way Tywin said Mother’s name. And as for Tywin desiring his own sister, there seemed to be something of a tradition of that in this family. Tyrion’s voice echoed in her mind: When Jaime was born he had a sister. A twin. His missing half, the golden beauty who never was.

Brienne wondered if the last puppet performance had been a true accident, if Tywin hadn’t counted on Jaime’s poor puppeteering skills to ruin the show, so he would have an excuse to rope Brienne into his schemes.

Jaime ran his hands over his face. “He always wins,” he muttered into his palms. “But I won’t do it because he wants me to do it, even if I want to do it.”

Even if I want to do it.

He cares for you.

What isn’t dangerous, in this life?

Brienne scooted across the floor until she was leaning against the bed beside Jaime, careful not to touch him, to keep empty space between them. Jaime’s face was still buried in his hands, his shoulders hunched.

“But you wouldn’t force me,” she said softly, gently, truthfully. When he looked up at her, his face and hands were wet with tears of anger and despair. Brienne wanted to hug him, wipe the tears off his cheeks with her fingers and tuck his head under her chin and hold him close, knew she mustn’t touch him. He had to hear her. “You wouldn’t force me, Jaime. And you certainly wouldn’t degrade me. Your father doesn’t get to win everything.”

He watched her like she was the last source of light and heat in the Long Night of legend, like she could hold him up lest he drown. Yet he still looked like a puppet with its strings cut, his soul
butchered.

Brienne stood up, her legs and rump stiff and cold as petrified wood from sitting on the floor. The whole house seemed to be squeezing itself like a fist of icy meanness and spite.

“Come on,” she said briskly, motioning for Jaime to get up. He just looked up at her, not moving. She sighed and headed for the door. “I’m going to change into actual clothes,” she said over her shoulder. “Where’s your jacket? We’re going for a walk.”

Chapter End Notes

I filched the title of this chapter from Angela Carter’s short story “The Erl-King.”

We should start a registered charity: the Fund for Lannister Family Counseling.
People were building a bonfire in the center of the square when Jaime and Brienne emerged from the shop. More akin to a funeral pyre than to the kinds of bonfires people built out of dead branches and mown grass on Tarth, it consisted of kindling, broken furniture, a thousand odds and ends people had brought out of their homes. Mr. Florent the sweet-seller presided over an army of urchins and housewives and a few men who stacked and shifted and built the bonfire higher and higher. It would be quite something, even if Brienne suspected most of the participants were in it for the incentive to clean out their homes and the fun of a chaotic public activity, rather than love of the decidedly gloomy R’hllor.

Mr. Florent waved to her and Jaime as they passed. Brienne waved back, but Jaime kept his eyes on the cobblestones, as though Brienne were force-marching him along. He had put on his ornate, ludicrous firefighter’s jacket and washed his hands, but his hair was still dirty and his clothes paint-bespattered. Brienne had put on trousers and her too-short raincoat, and popped into the kitchen to tell Tysha they would be back for supper. Hopefully Tywin would assume they were still upstairs, Jaime busily debauching Brienne, and not come looking for them.

They walked down the hill in silence, past people doing their Winter’s Eve shopping, past windows decorated for the holiday. Here and there, Brienne recognized the stylized flames cut out of red paper by worshipers of R’hllor, and reflected on Tywin’s fantasy scenario: a throne room bathed in red and yellow flames, people dying in agony. She shuddered with more than just the December cold. Suddenly all these gods, all these stories which were supposed to tell them who they were seemed eerily alike, and nothing to do with either her or Jaime.

The abandoned park was stripped of leaves, the skeleton of the world bared to their eyes, the layer of mulch underfoot thick enough that their shoes kept sinking into it with an unpleasant sucking noise. This time Brienne led the way, Jaime following morosely behind, barely willing to lift his arms and move branches out of the way. Brienne considered letting a branch whip him in the face, to see if that might rouse him, remembered that he would not be likely to react well to a blow, however well-meaning. So she waited patiently for him to pass through the space she opened for him, moving naked branches and spiny shrubs out of their way.

Leaves and mud covered the black and white checked dance floor. Rain had washed the fallen Queen Daenerys clean from behind, while in front she had sunk so deep into the mud her face was completely invisible. Brienne had to search for a bit until she found the branches Jaime had fashioned into improvised swords, where they’d been discarded at the end of their duel. Weeks out in the winter weather had made them waterlogged and soft, but the rot had not set in just yet.

Brienne offered Jaime a branch, holding the other loosely by her leg, ready to spring into action at the first sign of a response from him. He stared at his feet, his jaw set stubbornly, making a terrible show of a man not noticing what was right in front of him.

“Jaime, take your sword,” Brienne said gently.

No response. He shoved his hands into his pockets and hunched his shoulders. Brienne wanted to cry for him and to scream at him. Wanted to rap him on the shins with the branch, make him jump and dance with pain.
She marched up to Jaime until she was so close he had to look up or his lowered forehead would have collided with her throat. Their faces were almost closer than they had been when they’d kissed.

“Take your sword, Jaime, or so help me the Seven I will beat you and leave you here, and you can lie down and die or crawl back on your hands and knees,” Brienne growled, only half feigning fury and resolve. “You know I could do it.”

He gaped at her, his pupils round, twin holes in his skull. She stepped back, giving him room, and held out his sword again. She knew now she had cast down the gauntlet she would have to follow through: if he did not meet her halfway, she could not go on carrying him. He had to carry himself or they were both lost.

Hesitantly, as though unsure of his own ability to grasp and hold, he took the end of the proffered branch, hefted it. Brienne exhaled, fell into a loose-limbed pose, alert and waiting. She saluted him formally. He returned the salute, his movements still jerky, but focusing, drawing himself together.

Brienne made the first swing. Jaime parried it, but only just.

She moved slowly, almost lazily, letting Jaime see her moves coming, giving him time to rally and respond. Before long, she could see the flush of irritation rise in his cheeks when he realized she was holding out on him, letting him off easy. He pressed her, swinging his sword with strength lent by anger, his movements becoming more fluid, like ice thawing and trickling, finding its way over stones and grass.

Very soon they were dancing. Brienne let Jaime take the lead and chase her backward across the wet marble floor, laughing with the simple joy of movement whenever one of them slipped and nearly lost their footing. They never fell, though, and Jaime hissed and grunted in anger at her laughter and her still letting him win, still in control though she retreated before him.

So she turned and pressed back, forcing him to retreat backward, her blood singing when she saw the glint of a challenge met and answered in his eyes. He grinned at her and swung high. She dodged and brought her sword around, nearly catching him on the thigh, but he blocked and parried, two-handed.

They moved faster and faster, until Brienne twirled on her heel like an ice skater and brought her sword around in a fancy swirl which would have rendered Mr. Goodwin, her swordfighting teacher on Tarth apoplectic. The swords tangled, scraping against each other, then the upper halves of both went flying as the waterlogged wood finally gave in and snapped with a dull, wet crack.

They stood, panting and holding the broken spars of their branches and grinning at each other like fools. Jaime dropped his branch first, wiped the sweat off his face with the sleeve of his blue jacket, gave a whoop of delight and exhaustion. Brienne smiled back toothily, happier than she had felt in ages, her breath gusting out of her in clouds of vapor. She shivered, sweaty and overheated in her thin raincoat.

“Jaime,” she said quietly to get his attention. “I don’t care what he wants. You wouldn’t do it.”

He panted, wiped his mouth and chin, his own breath steaming in the frigid air. He considered her statement. “Because you’re stronger than me.”

Brienne shook her head. Really, he could be as mulish as she. “I didn’t say you couldn’t, I said you wouldn’t. You wouldn’t ever hurt me.”

“A dangerous assumption to make, Brienne.”
“I trust you.” He stared at her, mouth opening and closing silently. She spread her arms wide, empty and all-encompassing, and shrugged, and smiled. “I trust you. If you were to do it… If we were to do it… I wouldn’t get hurt. It might hurt, but it wouldn’t hurt me.”

Jaime took a step closer, nearly stepping into her arms, but held off, just at the invisible boundary between their bodies. His voice was low and urgent. “You don’t have to do it. The puppet show, I mean. I may not hurt you, but he will. You don’t have to enact a rape for him, Brienne.”

She had been wrong. She could be more mulish than he any day. “I do have to do it. He took Pod and Sansa and me in, he shelters us, he feeds us…”

“It will ruin you,” Jaime interrupted, a desperate edge to his voice. “One time is all it takes, you’ll be in his clutches forever after.”

“Better me than Sansa. Or Pod. Or you. I owe him one performance, and it’s only charades.” Brienne knew this was false, but she pressed on. “I will survive.”

Jaime looked so desolate in the face of her stubbornness, the strength and wryness leached out of him again, she had to step in, close the distance between them and enfold him in her arms, lend him some of her solid presence. He clutched at her, a drowning man, his fingers tangling in her hair, still short but growing out. He tugged, almost painfully.

“I lied, you know,” he murmured into Brienne’s ear, his breath a furnace on her chilled, sweaty skin. “I like your hair like this. It brings out your eyes.”

“You told me that already.”

“I rarely shut up. I meant it.”

This time, she really could not tell who kissed whom, she was too absorbed in yet another discovery. Not only could kisses be an exploration, a fumble after the unknown, not only could they let her taste and feel his saliva, his last meal, his smoking and rough beard, himself, not only could they spell out reassurance, comfort, anger, desire, but they could speak. There was a whole language to it, entire sentences contained in one way of lips gliding together, another angle at which tongues might grapple and part and slide together.

This kiss started by saying You are not alone. I’m here. Then it shifted into I want you, and Brienne pressed closer, fingers in Jaime’s hair, on the flushed skin of his neck, to assure him she wanted him too, she wanted him too. She was not certain which one of them said it, but she suspected it was both of them: I don’t know what to do. I’m scared. Hold me.

The death of her father still weighed heavy on Brienne, heavy as the lowering December sky above them, promising the first snow of that bitterly cold winter. She knew nothing had been resolved, she still had to face Tywin and his dragon. But as she held Jaime and stood there, in the mud and the cold, amidst the remnants of the Targaryens’ pride and vanity, she could not imagine ever letting him go, could not imagine a time and a place in which she was not able to touch him like this, he was not able to breathe wetly on her neck, his arms around her waist, holding her as close as though they were already lovers, had always been lovers.

You are not alone. I’m here. I’m here.

They walked home in a different kind of silence, one which enveloped them into a shared cocoon of warmth, their hands brushing, sometimes briefly holding, fingers teasing and entwining, Jaime pinching the skin on Brienne’s fingers with his nails to make her scowl and laugh, letting go and
swinging their hands like two pendulums only to come together again and again.

Supper was a subdued affair, Tywin eyeing Brienne and Jaime with a proprietary gleam in his eye throughout. Jaime glared back as he had become accustomed to do, though Brienne could tell he was half playing at it now. She stared at her plate and ate steadily, letting Tywin’s gaze wash over her like icy water, warmed from within by the memory of Jaime’s kisses, his hands on her waist, his breath on her face as they’d grappled with their pretend swords.

Later that night, Brienne could not sleep, though after revisiting the park with Jaime she felt tired and more at peace than she had in days. She lay staring at the play of shadows and light on the ceiling, listening to people still building the bonfire in the square, their cries of joy carried on the icy air yet muffled by the closed window. Sansa breathed deeply in her sleep, her hands folded under her cheek.

Jaime came into his room at last, released from his tasks in the workroom. Brienne heard him switch on the light, move around, heard the thump of his shoes on the floor. She got up, knocking Bear to the floor and not even noticing, her feet instantly cold, and approached their shared wall. She pressed her ear to it, heard Jaime switch off the light and thump his pillow. She knocked on the wall, twice, quickly and quietly so as not to wake Sansa. Silence answered her, then the pad of bare feet and two answering knocks.

Brienne smiled and climbed back into her bed. She wondered if she should have uncovered the hole, tried whispering through it, feeling the warm air of Jaime’s response, pressing her lips to it like separated lovers did in some of the sillier stories favored by Mrs. Roelle. But no: Brienne had covered up the hole for a reason, and that reason still stood.

Nevertheless, she could not sleep.

She shifted, bedsprings complaining dully, her feet getting warm under the duvet, against the hot-water bottle Tysha had filled for her before she went up. The duvet lay heavy on Brienne, as heavy as a body covering hers.

_Fucking_. She shifted again, slightly uncomfortable at the thought, her thighs rubbing together through her pajamas. She wondered if Jaime was lying in the dark, in his room, pondering how heavy she would be were she to lie on top of him.

Brienne had never done this before. She had heard girls talking about it, and understood it far better than the boys talking about what they did, for the girls were not as shy with each other and liked to make each other shriek with laughter, rather than going out of their way to inspire awe and envy in their friends.

Brienne moved her fingers over her pajamas carefully, as though she expected her own body to bite her. Wondering if she would be able to do it or if she was such a freak her body would look at her in puzzlement. Maybe if she were touching skin rather than cloth with skin under it. She glided lightly as over something rough and snagging, petted, explored, slow and tentative, still nervous at the softness of skin, the wiriness of hair, the unexpected crooks and dips.

Oh. _So that_ was why squeezing her thighs together could feel good, in a way which was more like the exhilaration of swordfighting or running till her calves burned than the pleasure of chocolate cake.

Brienne squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lip, terrified that Sansa would hear her, that _Jaime_ would hear her tiny huffs of discovery and pleasure. She rolled onto her side, so she was facing the wall, the one she did not share with Jaime, covered in fat red roses with their murderous thorns. Her favorite
position for sleeping, but she was not even a little sleepy now.

*Jaime. Jaime,* she whispered in her mind, trying not to move any part of her except her fingers, astonished at her ability to generate these sensations all on her own, just thinking about him a little bit. She bit her lip savagely, felt lancing pain in her mouth and something very different lower down, where she was heaving, rolling, expanding, as though her body were playing with a hula hoop inside, twirling it around and around, faster and faster.

She tried desperately not to move, but her head rolled back on her long neck of its own accord, her calves and spine stretched, metal springs twanged beneath her. She moaned through her nose and brought up her other hand to cover her mouth, sweat prickling in her hair, between her shoulder blades. In her mind, Jaime was smiling, kissing her, congratulating her with familiar mockery and real pride, his body heavy on hers, his arms and legs anchoring her.

Brienne gulped cold air, her lower lip aflame from biting, from kissing, and pulled her fingers out from under the duvet. Quickly buried them again when she caught a whiff of a new and unfamiliar yet unmistakable scent on them. She blushed hotly in the dark, but a part of her knew this embarrassment was a silly thing, small and irrelevant. Jaime might mock her for it but he would want to know more as well, and it did not concern the others.

Sansa slept on, undisturbed, and the whole house was quiet. The shop door closed with a faint rattle of the little bell far below, Tyrion trying to let himself in quietly, back from an evening’s fiddling. Brienne lay in her bed, feeling like her fingers were full of thorns, pricked bloody and deliciously raw, while the rest of her sang more and more softly, a quiet crooning between her legs. She slept as though held safe in a warm nest, in strong and loving arms.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Uh, yes. *That* happened as well.
Brienne was standing in the middle of a great throne room lined with the grinning skulls of dragons long dead, which was also a tiny, cramped stage in the basement of a house near Cobbler Square. She looked at her long, pale legs covered in thin yellow hairs, at her large, freckly hands. She knew she was dreaming, that it was not yet Bonfire Night and she was safe in her bed, under the heavy duvet, though she did not know how she could be so certain this was a dream. She felt a fool regardless, standing there in a thin white dress better suited to a lithe and pretty nymph, and her own lace-up shoes.

It was a dream because she did not hear Tyrion’s fiddle start up off to the side or Tywin’s voice intone the insipid narration from above. There was no warning at all before the dragon appeared. It was big, far bigger than she. It was covered in the crimson cloth with scales picked out on it in gold thread, which she had seen in the workroom, though the body shifting and undulating underneath the cloth was not composed of wooden struts, but long bone and glistening muscle. Its head was bewhiskered and bearded like that of a silver-haired man, its face pinched and wicked. The red and yellow light of distant fires shifted, and for a moment the dragon was no more than some cloth and wooden slats bolted together, and a bland human mask made grotesquely alive by paint and glued-on thread. But then the light shifted again, and the dragon shifted with it, oozing across the room toward Brienne, who stood rooted to the spot, powerless to fight, unable to run. She knew there was a throne made of swords behind her, but the metal was all twisted and melted together, she could not pry one of the swords free to defend herself, even if she did have time.

Oh gods, she thought. Jaime was right. Tywin has won.

Brienne raised her hands to cover her face and turned away, to at least try to run, as the dragon bore down on her. Just as it was about to knock her down to the stone floor and cover her with its hideous, scaly flesh, she woke, gasping, choking back a scream. She had had dreams of falling many times, always waking just before she hit the ground, but this was so much worse because it had felt so much more real.

She lay motionless in her bed, seized by a superstitious fear which would not let her move lest the dream proved real, listening to rain patter and scrabble against her window like a plague of hungry rats trying to get in. But then she heard Sansa’s quiet breathing off to the side and someone scratching quietly at the door, the way a cat might scratch yet much higher than a cat could reach.

“Brienne,” Jaime’s voice came through the keyhole, more hiss than whisper. “May I come in? I need to talk to you.”

Brienne lay unmoving, wondering why he did not simply enter. The door was not locked, and he had never shown much care for her tender maidenly sensibilities before.

“Come in,” she hissed back, wondering how she could even be sure it was Jaime in the dark, in the dead of night.

Someone came into the room, treading noiselessly so as to rouse no one else, moving like a swimmer through the gloom. The returning supple grace of his movements reassured Brienne, and once he crouched on the floor by her bed she was certain it was indeed Jaime. She could smell him,
turpentine and tobacco and unwashed skin. And strong liquor on his breath. She recoiled from that last one a little, for he was a wild creature when he was like this, barely visible, a phantom of male smells, feral and composed of the night’s elements. A lion returning from the hunt with blood on his jaws and a hunger still in him. His teeth were chattering.

She fumbled for him, but he shrank away from her touch. His clothes were damp and very cold. “Jaime, what’s happened? Were you outside, in the rain?” she whispered, urgent, worried.

“Yes. I…” He shivered violently. “Can I get under the covers with you for a bit? I’m frozen through.”

Mrs. Roelle rose up before Brienne’s eyes, washed in a fall of Tarth summer sunlight in the dark bedroom, her finger raised didactically as she informed a younger Brienne never to believe boys when they told her they were cold or hurt or sad, and could she hold them for a bit, let them lie beside her and share her warmth.

Brienne scowled at the Mrs. Roelle in her head, who knew nothing about anything real. Nevertheless, she hesitated a bit before moving closer to the wall, pulling the duvet aside.

“Fine, but take off whatever’s damp. You’ll catch your death.”

Jaime didn’t even chuckle at her commanding him to strip and lie down beside her. He just toed off his shoes, shrugged out of his firefighter’s jacket, its buttons gleaming in the dark. Brienne heard rather than saw him peel off his shirt, his trousers, his socks, felt slowly mounting dread with each garment he discarded. Mercifully, he left his smallclothes on before he climbed into bed and lay down beside her, pulling the duvet up to their chins. There was so much of his skin so close to her already, Brienne doubted she could have borne it had he been completely naked.

He was shivering with cold, grinding his teeth, trying to make them stop chattering. Brienne did not wait for him to ask, simply enfolded him in her arms, let the chill of his skin and the warmth of hers mingle and even out. She went on holding him even after Jaime stopped trembling. It came to her in a flash that he might smell what she had been doing before she slept, on the hand with which she stroked his damp, matted hair, on her sheets and her pajamas and her skin, but either his nose was stuffed or he did not care.

“I killed it,” he said after a while, when he could speak without the shivers making his teeth sound like dried seeds in a giant rattle. “I killed his bloody king.”

Brienne dared not move. It was surreal, lying in her bed and holding a nearly naked Jaime, yet it also felt as if it had happened many times before. Centuries of women holding their trembling men, late at night in their beds. But what he had just said – there was no precedent for that.

“How do you mean?” she asked finally, certain that she was being very slow and stupid, and ought to have been able to figure it out on her own.

Jaime shifted, burrowed more deeply into the mattress, into Brienne’s arms, his head nestled under her chin. “The puppet. His dragon-king. I drank some of Tyrion’s super secret whiskey stash, and then I chopped the fucking thing into little pieces with Tywin’s own axe, for splitting big blocks of wood, and I smuggled it out the back door and threw it on the bonfire. Took me three trips to carry it all out, the blasted thing was big. Tywin already has the rest of us, he doesn’t get to have you as well.”

“Jaime.” Her voice was a mere breath. The enormity of it! As gestures went, Brienne was certain nothing she ever experienced in the future could possibly top this.
After she had had a little time to think it over, she said: “It seems he doesn’t have you, either.”

Jaime squirmed, uncomfortable with the implied praise, his muscles smooth against Brienne’s pajamas. “I don’t care if he kills me for it,” he muttered to her collarbone.

“Don’t talk nonsense. You’d care very much, and do you really think I’d just let him get to you?”

“Don’t nag,” he said, as though they had been married a long time. “What could you do, anyway?”

Brienne had no idea if she could stop Tywin, but she knew she would try, for Jaime, although she had not even tried to save herself. Had not thought it possible or worthwhile.

She squeezed Jaime’s shoulders hard enough to hurt, buried her mouth and nose in his dirty hair. “Thank you. Thank you,” she whispered fervently. His arms tightened around her middle, around her ribs, his skin still a little cold through her pajamas.

A part of Brienne wished he would roll over and press himself against her, face to face, skin to skin, slip his hands under her pajamas and do everything she knew about and everything she didn’t. But they were both exhausted, and they were so comfortable lying together. It felt utterly, earth-shatteringly normal to share her pillow with Jaime, to listen to his breaths whistle toward a faint snore as she fell asleep.

She was in Pod’s crow’s nest at the top of the house, looking out of the window at the bright morning outside. This was a dream too, and yet it wasn’t. Pod stood beside her, peering at the world outside, but they did not see the roofs of King’s Landing stretching toward the horizon, the Red Keep a small, frozen flame far away. They saw the sea, blue as the Narrow Sea back home had been, yet bigger, wider and deeper and more mysterious even than the Sunset Sea. Seagulls wheeled and cried above its surface, ruched into tiny waves like blue silk. Brienne could smell the salt breeze, feel the reflected heat of the midsummer sun on her skin. She was still in her pajamas and barefoot, but Pod was fully dressed, right down to the grey woolen knee socks Mrs. Roelle had knit for him as a goodbye present.

“I should go now,” Pod said in his slow, quiet, pensive way. He looked up at Brienne, his blue eyes uncertain. They had the same eyes, she realized with a pang, their father’s eyes. Something nobody could take away from them. “Shouldn’t I?” he asked.

She thought about it, then she smiled at her little brother, grown taller over the past months. “It’s up to you. What do you want to do?”

Pod thought about it some more, nodded at last.

A small boat, like a life boat, was tied to a rusty old nail sticking out of the windowsill. It bobbed on the blue waters which lapped at the house as at a granite cliff. Pod climbed in agilely, a born islander, and Brienne untied the knot, tossed him the rope. He rowed out to where his ship waited for him, sails billowing in the breeze, eager to be gone. As Pod splashed up to its wooden hulk, which trailed green seaweed like the hair of dead mermaids, a rope ladder was thrown down to him over the side.

Before he stepped out of the boat and began to climb, he turned and cupped his hands around his mouth. “Take care,” he called out to Brienne. “Tell Sansa I’ll miss her, and tell Uncle Tywin I’m sorry I couldn’t stay and finish those ships-in-a-bottle.”

Brienne waved goodbye with both arms while Pod climbed aboard, kept waving until the top of the ship’s tallest mast vanished below the horizon. The sea breeze was hot on her face, and she tasted salt.
Brienne awoke, licking her lips, to find the room discolored with early dawn, Jaime asleep beside her with his arm thrown over his eyes, and Sansa glaring at her over his sleeping form. Brienne realized Sansa had grown as well, her white frilly nightdress too small for her. She was big enough to climb out of her cot and lean her little elbows on the bed.

“Why’s he in bed with you?” she demanded with prim hauteur, a tangle-haired princess offended that two of her retinue had become involved behind her back.

“He felt poorly in the night,” Brienne said, thinking of her nightmare about the dragon, of the bonfire stacked and waiting on the square.

Sansa nodded wisely, magnanimously. “I see, I see,” she said, parroting what an adult might say. Then, little-girl shrill: “I want Auntie Tysha!”

“Hush, Sansa, you’ll wake the whole house,” Brienne hissed, trying to reach the girl without jostling Jaime, wondering where Sansa’s socks had gone to. The room was very cold.

Without moving his arm from over his eyes, Jaime spoke in a completely awake voice. “Brienne, would you please make her be quiet?”

They might have been married for years and Sansa their baby. Brienne had a sudden prophetic vision of marriage and beds shared and blond children, some beautiful and graceful, some horsey and ungracefully, tripping her up at every turn, up and down the stairs of a tall, narrow house somewhere off Cobbler Square.

She surged up into a sitting position as though to grapple with the future and wrestle it into submission. “No,” she cried out. “I don’t want your children, Jaime!”

Jaime did not move from where he was comfortably ensconced, on his back in Brienne’s bed. In the washed-out light of dawn, the golden eyebrow he arched up at her was the only smudge of color in the room. That, and Sansa’s reddish hair and pink mouth, open as she tried to follow the subterranean shifts in their conversation.

“Calm down,” Jaime said equably. “I haven’t even had you yet.”

Brienne glared at him, and he grinned, knowing what she had been thinking.

“Instead of being so annoying all the time, fetch Sansa in here, please,” Brienne said stiffly. “She’s cold.”

Jaime did as he was told without argument. Sansa squealed with joy when he lifted her as high as the length of his arms would allow, and nestled her under the duvet between himself and Brienne. Then he reached over behind Sansa’s head and put his arm around Brienne’s shoulders with straightforward tenderness.

“I dreamed that Pod has run away to sea,” Brienne said slowly, staring at the ceiling.

Jaime yawned hugely, not bothering to cover his mouth. “Well, maybe he has. Where’s my tobacco tin?”

“No,” Brienne mused. “It was a wooden ship. They don’t use those any more, do they?”

Jaime didn’t answer. He was rummaging on the floor with his free hand, trying to locate the right pocket in his haphazardly dropped clothes.
Brienne sighed. “Please don’t smoke around Sansa.”

“You’re as bad as Tysha,” he groused but gave up the search, though he did fish Bear out from where the toy had spent the night, on the floor under Jaime’s firefighter’s jacket. Brienne gave Bear to Sansa, who hugged the worn-out old toy with a happy sigh.

Suddenly Jaime’s face went rigid with terror, then crumpled in on itself. Brienne shifted with concern but his voice stopped her, thin as a hiss of wind through hollow reeds. “I really did it, didn’t I?” he whispered. “I killed the king last night.”

“Yes, you did,” Brienne replied, low and warm. She caught his gaze, held it. “You are a shining knight. Even if you were three sheets to the wind when you did it.”

He made a face at her. “Two sheets, at most. And you should be grateful.”

“But I am.”

Brienne climbed out of bed, got tangled up in the duvet and his and Sansa’s legs, feeling like a lumbering aurochs. When she was finally standing on the floor, Sansa and Jaime looking up at her with eerily similar expressions of amused expectation, she leaned down, stroked Sansa’s soft hair, and kissed Jaime on the mouth, just her lips and his, a deep and tender kiss full of promise, endless vistas opening up between their lips.

“I am,” she whispered against Jaime’s mouth, kissed him again, a quick peck, and went to the bathroom, his low chuckle following her down the upstairs landing.

Chapter End Notes

There should be at least one AU in which Jaime stops Aerys before ever he hurts Rhaella, let alone tries to burn down an entire city, and doesn’t get crap for it.
Brienne brought good news from her trip to the bathroom and quick climb up the final flight of stairs, to Pod’s eyrie.

“Tywin’s gone somewhere,” she announced as she reentered her and Sansa’s bedroom, her feet chilled and her heart glad.

Jaime was smoking in her bed, tapping ash on the floor, Sansa fast asleep beside him with Bear clutched to her chest, her hair spilling over the pillow like a soft, wavy flame. Brienne considered scolding Jaime for smoking after she’d asked him not to, but decided her news was more important. She brandished the empty glass where Tywin’s teeth usually floated.

“He’s gone,” she repeated. “His teeth are gone with him.”

“They’re in his mouth, then,” Jaime drawled, an edge of nervousness underlying his insouciance. “All the better to eat me with.”

Brienne put the glass down on the floor, so he could use it as an improvised ashtray, and climbed up on the end of the bed, across from Jaime, her cold feet tangling with his warm ones under the duvet. He leaned forward and took her hand. “And Pod?” he asked gently.

Brienne shook her head, squeezing his hand. He squeezed back. “Gone as well. But I don’t think he’s with Tywin. I think he’s run off to become a cabin boy on some metal ship in hopes of finding out if there are any wooden ships still around. He left his toothbrush behind.”

“Pirates and seadogs don’t need toothbrushes,” Jaime said with a wink, and Brienne smiled, because she loved him, and because he had slept the whole night in her bed, and because Pod was free of Tywin forever.

“You mustn’t be afraid of him,” she said quietly, kissed Jaime’s knuckles. “You destroyed a tyrant in defense of the weak and the innocent. What’s one old toymaker compared to that?”

Jaime looked like he was about to tell her exactly what twenty-one years of blows and harsh words and blame and guilt had taught him, but then he smiled, if a little uncertainly, and brushed his thumb over Brienne’s lower lip in a way which made her feel grateful Sansa was there, because suddenly she was very aware that he was mostly naked in her bed, and her heart was thumping like a terrified rabbit, fit to burst out of her chest and run away to sea as well.

“You are not weak,” Jaime murmured, his eyes intent on her lips, the way he had used to stare at her across the dining-room table sometimes. Suddenly he grinned, making Brienne’s heart thump one last, painful time, and lift with relief. “And you’re only somewhat innocent.”

She pretended she would smack him, and he ducked, laughing, making the metal springs in the bed twang like a piano badly out of tune. Then Sansa woke up and said she was hungry, and Jaime declared he was so hungry he might just eat Sansa up, which made the girl tumble out of bed in a whirlwind of nightdress and hair and bedclothes and squealing. Which roused the whole house, but no one minded once they discovered Tywin had gone away on one of his mysterious excursions. Tysha and Tyrion were equanimous on the subject of Pod, accepting Brienne’s line of reasoning without question.
Once everyone was gathered in the kitchen, the rain beating a merry tattoo on the window, bacon positively danced in the frying pan, and Tysha danced at the stove, laughing soundlessly, her dark hair flying like an unkindness of ravens which bore nothing but good tidings. The toast got burned, and it was a joke, not a tragedy, as it would have been with Tywin there. His chair brooded at the head of the table, empty yet still ominous.

“Seven hells,” Jaime said, chewing a mouthful of bread soaked in egg yolk, scattering crumbs across the table. “I’m going to sit in his chair.”

Tysha’s hands flew up to her mouth, aghast. Tyrion eyed the chair, then his brother with silent misgiving.

Brienne had taken to sitting on Tywin’s left soon after coming to live in King’s Landing, so as to be between him and the children. Methodically she speared up a forkful of fried mushroom, potato and egg. Jaime had killed the dragon-king. She was not anxious on his behalf.

“It’s not the Iron Throne,” Jaime declared flippantly. “It won’t cut me or swallow me up.”

Even so, he lowered himself into the chair somewhat gingerly. But once he was in it, he grinned his easy, insolent, crooked grin, and sprawled as though the chair had been made for him especially. Tysha slumped with relief, moved from her backless stool to the chair Jaime had vacated, so she was sitting beside Tyrion. Jaime’s leg jostled Brienne’s under the table, and she started at the furtive touch, but returned a good-natured jostle of her own.

“I am seized with a notion,” Jaime announced, nursing his tea with fake innocence, a wicked smile on his face.

“Uh oh,” Tyrion muttered. “A single, solitary notion rolling around in there. Someone might need to massage his sore head. Brienne, your arms are longer than mine, will you do it?”

Brienne blushed, and Jaime threw a jam-covered crust at Tyrion. Tyrion dodged, the crust fell on the floor, and was promptly gobbled up by Dog.

“A notion, I said,” Jaime raised his voice over the general gale of laughter and Dog barking for more jammy crusts. “A great and glorious notion. Let’s not open the shop. Let’s make today a holiday. I think the death of a king merits it.”

Tyrion frowned. Tysha shook her head. Brienne could not hold back a smile.

“He chopped up the puppet,” she said softly, not looking at Jaime, knowing he was beaming smugly at her and everyone. “And put it on the bonfire.”

Tyrion and Tysha stared, their mouths opening and closing like they had both been struck speechless.

“You mad, wonderful bastard,” Tyrion said slowly, as though picking out the words in gold thread. “Is that where my whiskey’s gone? To lend you courage?”

“Tonight the Mad King will burn and not be reborn,” Jaime said with relish, ignoring his brother’s question.

“Unless it rains even more heavily, in which case he will just get very soggy and produce a lot of smoke,” Tyrion quipped, a grin dawning on his face.

“You,” Jaime said, his finger pointed at Tyrion’s nose, “have no sense of poetic justice, little
brother.”

Tyrion whooped and threw his napkin in the air. It floated barely half a foot up before it settled on his head, unleashing another storm of laughter and barking.

It was like the first day of the summer holidays, time stretching before them with nothing to do, golden and languid, the prospect of Tywin ever returning to the house impossible to imagine. It was a carnival, a time outside of time.

Instead of Brienne washing the breakfast dishes alone, everyone joined in, splashing each other with warm water and soap suds. Dog got drenched, and Sansa chased soap bubbles till she was breathless with laughter. Jaime stole a kiss from Brienne in the midst of this merry pandemonium. She shoved him off playfully, running sudsy hands through his hair.

“You’re filthy,” she said, pink and heaving with laughter.

“Didn’t hear you complaining before.” He winked at her, sniffed his armpit. “Gods, I could use a wash.”

“We all could,” Tyrion declared. “Wash the old year off, and wear the best clothes we can find.”

Everyone took turns in the ancient, claw-footed bathtub, and emerged pink and scrubbed and feeling light as air. Tysha brought out armfuls of fancy clothes she had made for the puppets, though she would not let anyone wear anything the puppets had already worn. Even so there was plenty left over, a vain emperor’s wardrobe full of unused, ornate garments, piled in great, haphazard heaps all over the upstairs landing and every bed in the house.

Brienne wore her black trousers, which still fit her well enough though they were starting to show just a bit more ankle than she would have liked. Tysha knocked just as Brienne was contemplating which sweater to don, and brought in several garments, including a sapphire-blue silk blouse with tiny, clear, polished crystals for buttons. It was a little tight across the shoulders, but it fit nicely over Brienne’s chest and seemed to lend her movements some of its slinkiness. Nothing could be done about her shoes, so she wore her old lace-ups, but she didn’t care. She was happiest to see Tysha had exchanged her black workaday clothes and her ghastly grey Sunday gown for a glorious caftan decorated with woven tendrils of golden ivy and black leaves and grapes. With her red lips and her midnight hair spilling down her back, she looked like a singer or a courtesan from Essos, a woman with power and self-possession enough to look down on men and not suffer the consequences.

“You are so beautiful,” Brienne breathed.

Tysha smiled, a young woman still, almost a girl, only twenty years old. The caftan had no pockets, so she couldn’t carry her pad of paper around, and had to mime her response. She pointed at the blouse, then at Brienne’s eyes, then she described a very tall person with her outstretched arms, and topped it all off with a gesture like she wanted to embrace the whole world, a look of awe and joy on her face. Brienne shuffled her feet, uncomfortable with the praise, but she accepted it with as much grace as she could muster.

It was a whole other matter when she met Jaime going back downstairs. He looked her up and down, slow and knowing, and gave her his most brilliant, sincere smile. “You look good in blue.”

“Thank you,” she managed, her face heating up. “You look breathtaking.”

And he did, in a wine-red shirt which fit him perfectly and old-fashioned breeches such as a gentleman about town of the previous century might have worn, with riding boots to match. His
clean hair curled gently around his shirt collar. Brienne wanted to put her fingers in it, confirm it was still as soft as it looked. His grin told her he knew what she’d said was nothing but the plain truth. Brienne did not mind, too busy marveling at this new ease between them, an almost palpable presence on her fingertips, soft as goose down, shivery as the feel of green ice.

Was that all it took, to share a bed? Brienne suspected there was more to it than that. There were the weeks and months of their difficult, unusual courtship, not yet complete, the death of a puppet king, and the years and years before that, when they had never thought of each other because their worlds had never touched, and each had been ensconced in their own private misery, certain that no other person could ever possibly reach in and touch them in their loneliness.

She tried to tell herself that she was being very foolish and this was nothing more than the effect of her daily proximity to Jaime, of their isolation and her lack of experience with boys. But it did no good to think such sober thoughts, when quite apart from how her body felt whether she was near him or not, she could have sworn their very souls had recognized each other, and were reaching out to touch with trembling hands. Her soul was the simpler one and less troubled, despite everything, while his was spiky and wary, and peeked out at hers from under a rock, blinking in sunlight.

The day passed at a crawl and at a mad dash. They moved from the kitchen to the back parlor and lit a fire in the grate, making the room hot and cozy. Brienne and Tyrion and Tysha ransacked the shop for toys not yet sold as Winter’s Eve presents and spread them all before Sansa’s feet, making her a true princess for once. Jaime went out and brought back fish and chips and ale and cider for everyone, like the spoils of war, bought with who knew what money, probably stolen from the till. Not bothering with plates, they ate straight from the wrapping paper resting on their knees. Tyrion and Tysha played music, and Jaime danced, though only a little.

“My dancing days are over,” he declared, dropping down to the floor beside Brienne, sitting much closer than he would have done even the previous day. “I’m a kingslayer and almost a family man now.”

Brienne pretended to glare at him, and he grinned back, tugged on her short hair gently, sharply, as though they were little and teasing each other in the schoolyard. She feigned she would punch him on the arm in retaliation, the merest brush of knuckles. He pretended he was mortally wounded. Brienne imagined their whole lives stretching before them, just like this, years beyond count, repetitive and glorious. She had drunk a glass of cider earlier, so she made herself eat some of the leftover fish and chips, gone cold by now, to keep her head clear. She could feel Jaime’s eyes on her as she chewed and swallowed.

It was hard to believe it was not Winter’s Eve, so festive was the day, that it was only Bonfire Night, Winter’s Eve still a few days off. It was the time of the old year’s dying, the world shedding one year like a snake sheds its skin so another could emerge in its stead. Brienne felt light, content, stripped of all her burdens, or near as. Guilt and sorrow for her father, a lingering worry for Pod, a sweet, aching anxiety about Jaime trailed her footsteps still, but she found it all easier to carry than before.

It grew dark early, but the bonfire was not yet lit in the square. Sansa had fallen asleep on the carpet in front of the fire, surrounded by toys, her head pillowed on the drowsing Dog. Tyrion and Tysha were playing very quietly, a soft, shapeless, lulling tune. Brienne sat on the floor with Jaime, his fingers entwined with hers, his scar sharp against her palm. She felt bold enough to rest her head on his shoulder, so he wouldn’t notice she was intent on breathing in the smell of his clean skin and hair, the frying oil and ale, tobacco and toothpaste on his breath.

“You shouldn’t have given Sansa ale,” she murmured, dizzy with the scents of him.

“It was only a mouthful. She was tiring herself out with all that running and jumping.”
“You mean she was tiring you out. I think I should take her up to bed,” Brienne said, though she really didn’t want to move.

“I think you should leave her as she is, and come to bed with me.”

Brienne lifted her head and met Jaime’s eyes. His face showed so many things at once, hope, fear, stubbornness, want. He was braced and vulnerable. Brienne opened her mouth to respond, and was interrupted by the sound of a woman singing.

Tysha had found her voice. It was sweet and crystal-clear as she sang the words to *I loved a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair* as though they had been written for her and her alone. She sounded like a songbird soaring after the sun, like a brook burbling over mossy stones. Tyrion accompanied her quietly on his fiddle. And when she was done, she smiled benevolently for the whole world and for no one in particular, smiled because she could, and basked in the feel and sound of her own voice raised high and clear. Then she enveloped Tyrion in an unbreakable embrace.

Brienne had wanted to weep during the song, moved and transported yet not really sad, but she hadn’t wanted to spoil the moment. So she swallowed her tears, and tugged Jaime up to his feet, and led him out of the parlor, leaving the lovers to their intimacy, and Sansa and Dog to their dreams.

Chapter End Notes

What’s that I hear? Distant, echoing cries of “You’re stopping there?!?!” Yes. I am.
*evil grin* The time till the next chapter will pass quickly enough. ;-)
Revelations and Illuminations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Once they were upstairs in her and Sansa’s room, all of Brienne’s fears came swooping in on her like carrion crows, set on pecking out her eyes. She did not switch on the light, leaving the room mostly dark, dappled with reflected streetlight.

Brienne looked at her unmade bed, shoved the clothes Tysha had given her to try on earlier to the floor. She picked up Bear from the tangle of sheets and laid him ceremoniously on Sansa’s cot. Whether Sansa wanted him or not, it did not seem right for Brienne’s oldest and dearest toy to be sitting on the bed where she was about to… to what?

“Brienne,” Jaime spoke from the dark. He lingered by the door, watching her with glittering eyes, a nocturnal creature at ease in its natural surroundings. “I’m not going to fuck you if you don’t want me to.”

Again that word. Brienne was getting used to fitting it into her way of thinking and feeling about the world, but it still made her start.

Jaime watched her, his hands in his pockets and his arms tense like piano wires, added in a soft voice: “I want to, don’t mistake my meaning. But I’ll do nothing you don’t want.”

“I…” She knew she would be able to say none of this if she were looking at him, if the lights were on. “I want to. But I’m a little nervous. Not because of you. And I’m not scared of pain. Just…”

“Everything,” he finished for her.

She nodded, eyes riveted to her bed.

“Is there anything I can do to put you more at ease?” he asked, and it suddenly became clear to Brienne that this was not easy for him either, for all that he was older and, she trusted, more experienced. The thought loosened the constricted feeling in her chest sufficiently for her to turn and sit on the bed and look at him, outlined in gold and dark.

“I would like a glass of water. I’m thirsty after all that salty fish and chips,” she said. Jaime chuckled and went to fetch her some water.

When he returned, he stood by her bed and watched her drink. She hardly felt the water go down, and left four finger-widths on the bottom. The way he was looking at her made it difficult to swallow. Jaime drained the remaining water in one gulp, his throat working so Brienne’s fingertips itched while she watched him, her eyes now adjusted to the darkness. He put the empty glass on the windowsill, and Brienne kicked off her shoes and lay back on the bed, fully dressed. Jaime stretched out beside her.

The red roses on the wallpaper looked maroon in the darkness. They were lying in a bower of roses, all succulent flesh and sharp thorns. Except they weren’t: they were lying in a cold bedroom in a house off Cobbler Square, on a bed which would twang and protest if they moved a lot.

Brienne stared at the play of dark and light on the ceiling. She was certain that if she moved or spoke or even looked at Jaime, the world would crack open in a way which would make the night with the apple tree seem like a game of charades, a real one, where everything was pretend and the outcome
“Just so you’re not worrying about where everyone is,” Jaime murmured, gently teasing, “Sansa and Dog are deep in dreamland downstairs, Tyrion and Tysha are exorcising Tysha’s bed of Tywin’s presence, and it’s starting to sleet, so our neighbors are having a little trouble getting the bonfire to actually catch fire.”

“Oh.”

She could feel Jaime watching her in the dark, nearly as close as he had been the previous night, but she had not been so nervous then, though she had worn far fewer clothes, and he even fewer. His fingers touched her eyebrows, feather-light, traced their gentle arches, ghosted over her eyelashes and nose, her cheeks, her lips. Brienne opened her mouth a little to his touch and closed her eyes, and trusted him. She leaned into him, into his first, questing kiss.

The second kiss was already a meeting, a dance, bolder and more open.

Brienne focused on all the new sensations, and whenever she felt a stab of panic at some new thing Jaime did or her body did, she breathed deeply through her nose and did not allow fear to turn her to stone. It wasn’t any easier because he had already seen her, since now they were using all of their senses, and sight was the least of it in the dark room. When Jaime unbuttoned her blouse and touched her there, his fingers as warm as the evening air was cold on her sensitive flesh, she wriggled and sighed, making him smile against her skin. When he showed her how kisses could be bestowed to parts of her body other than her mouth, it seemed so obvious and yet so big, Brienne could not think about it, could only feel.

Then she told herself that possibly she could be undoing buttons and pushing cloth out of the way too, and so she did. Jaime shrugged out of his shirt, dropped it on the floor, and pressed her into the mattress, his torso just a little heavy on her, skin on naked skin. They kissed like the year was dying, and another might never be born to replace it. Like they were on a bare mountaintop at the end of the world, the place where the Sunset Sea poured out into the abyss, the cold wind ripping at their hair. Jaime had shaved that morning, and the skin of his face was slightly rough on Brienne’s skin, but his lips and tongue were smooth, wet, eager for her.

Her fingers roamed him, explored him, charted his chest, played his ribs like a string instrument. His back was long and smooth beneath her palms, the muscles moving with infinite variety under his skin. Brienne had a fleeting thought that she may have conjured him up somehow, that his body may not have quite existed until she touched it, made it substantial with her fingers. As she was made substantial by his hands and lips on her. The springs in her bed might have been a gently rocking sea which augmented every touch, every sigh, and sent it rippling away, spreading through air and brick and wood, concentric circles of desire.

Jaime put her fingers in his mouth and sucked them, one by one, and Brienne could not believe she had never noticed how sensitive her own fingers were before. It took her breath away. When she tried the same on his long, slim fingers, nibbling on the calluses from the paint brush, he hummed deep in his throat, a vibration more than a sound, which went right through Brienne’s own breastbone. After the previous night, she knew exactly what that shivery sensation between her legs meant, recognized the desire that Jaime would shift and push his thigh between her legs as he had done that day in the shop, but she was not begrudging the kisses, the caresses, the time he took with her, with them both. She felt hot as with the fiercest blush, yet not at all embarrassed or ashamed.

“Brienne,” Jaime whispered, his tongue darting out to touch the delicate shell of her ear. “You have lovely ears, do you know that?” That made her huff with startled laughter. She hoped he would not tell her she was pretty. He was kissing her collarbone (who’d have thought her collarbones were so
interesting?), kissing her nipples, so she sighed and bit her lip. “Lovely ears,” he murmured between kisses. “And beautiful eyes. And an ugly face, but I like that about you.” That really made her laugh. He was smiling, kissing up her neck, to her jaw. “And I really, really want to kiss your cunt.”

Brienne gasped. Another word which needed turning over and fitting in, something blunt and hard made iridescent and enticing by the way he said it. Jaime was breathing on her cheek, waiting for her response. She swallowed, wishing for another drink of water.

“You’ve done it, I trust,” Jaime said, teasingly and just a touch nervously, caressing her breast, the scar on his palm grazing her. “With your fingers?”

“Yes.” *Once. Last night.* He didn’t need to know that.

He moved his hand to her cheek, turned her head so she was facing him. “Then I think I can promise you I will do no worse.”

“Yes.”

Brienne breathed the word, half a question and half a plea, before she could stop herself and seek escape. Jaime was good as gold, undressing himself quickly and her more slowly, though she could feel the tremor in his hands, the telltale hardness against her thigh when he leaned in to kiss her for reassurance. That made her jump a little, all the novels she had read, the anatomy book she’d pored over, puzzling out the jargon, the whispered tales overheard in the girls’ washroom, all of them ganging up to remind her what *that* meant. But she found she did not mind and she did not care, and she was not afraid. For he was Jaime, and she wanted him and trusted him. Her heart had broken several times already. What was a little pain compared to that?

She discovered that he had lied, a bit, in a good way, for where her fingers had known some things with no explanation required, his mouth and his gentle, insistent hand knew other things, and learned still more, and did not hurt at all. Brienne bit her lip, bit it so hard her teeth nearly broke skin, but it was no use. She gasped Jaime’s name, feeling ridiculous, and he kissed her belly and caressed the soft skin of her inner thighs with his thumbs like it was velvet, silk, something rich and fragile placed in his care. Brienne wanted to touch his hair, feel its silkiness under her saliva-sticky fingers, but didn’t dare. She knew it was ludicrous to hesitate, to hold back, she was already doing more than she had ever thought possible and would do more still before the night was over, but her hands would not move, safe by her sides, bunching sheets into sweaty knots. The very thought of touching Jaime’s warm and solid head nearly undid her then and there, while he kissed her where she was smooth with muscle yet just a little plump, just below her bellybutton, his shoulders rubbing against her thighs. When she had her breath under control, he kissed her *there* again, and kept kissing her, only this time he did not stop even when she felt the lifting, rolling, hula hoop feeling begin inside her.

Eons later Jaime sat up, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, as he had done that first morning after draining his mug of tea, and smiled at her, his teeth and eyes glimmering in the dark, his enjoyment in her pleasure evident in his voice, in his other hand caressing Brienne’s face, her panting lips, her sweaty chest. His hand shook, he shifted on the bed like a rabbit thumping the ground in nervous anticipation, and didn’t need to tell Brienne what he wanted. She reached for him, enfolded him in her arms like she was always meant to hold him like this, and opened her legs wider, opened herself with no instruction from him, and it did hurt, but Jaime panted his desire and his agonized patience on her cheek and in her ear while he waited, tense and coiled, so close she could hardly stand it, feeling surrounded and wanted and overwhelmed. Brienne focused on Jaime’s weight, his chest scratchy on her tender breasts, his legs and arms entwined with hers, his hips smooth against the skin of her thighs, the soft wire-brush feel of hair against her lower belly, his warm breath, his
lips kissing her face, murmuring encouragement and pleasure and gratitude and love. Then she shifted, and wrapped herself around him, and he could finally move in her.

She listened to Jaime’s tiny, incoherent noises, the sounds their bodies made as he moved and she tried to move with him, to keep up, the twanging of the bed springs which should have been dead embarrassing yet wasn’t. This was like running, climbing, dancing with branches, it was nothing like it, it was different and better and breathtaking. The twitch of Jaime’s hips, the words and wordless gasps which fell from his lips and spilled over Brienne’s skin like summer rain, his shoulder smooth and soft when she rubbed her cheek on it, his waist and back slippery with sweat under her fingers, his throat, his pulse under her lips. She no longer belonged only to herself, she was also his, and that was fine as well as terrifying, for Jaime was hers too. Brienne felt a surge of power, of pure strength and wonder to think he had wanted this, he was like this with her. Jaime kissed her, their lips swollen with want and joy, and Brienne tasted what she knew was herself on his tongue. His hair brushed her flushed cheeks. He was there with her, he was right there with her, he was right there. She felt Jaime shudder and moan, whispering her name wetly against her jaw, her neck, as she clung to him and tried to cry out but couldn’t because she was also trying to breathe, and couldn’t quite manage either.

Brienne sighed at the void he left suddenly, his knuckles brushing her thigh as he panted and moaned his fill. The premonition of children tripping her up at every step receded into the background, still present but no longer looming quite so large. She ignored the stickiness between her legs, embraced Jaime and let his shoulders heave back to even breaths within the circle of her arms. Jaime kissed her like her skin was the most precious thing in the entire world, and Brienne felt at peace, though her heart was still hammering in her chest.

It could not have been later than suppertime when the screaming started.

Chapter End Notes

So: and that happened. One more chapter to go!
Sometimes it seemed to Brienne that Tarth and her life there had been contained, held like liquid in a vessel, within a circumscribed, timeless void, untouched by the world, by the passing of ages. The night she had donned her father’s uniform and climbed an apple tree, she had set time running, wound the clock and let it loose upon the world. The pent-up, released momentum had picked her up and carried her away, tossed her on the current and washed her up in King’s Landing, battered and bruised yet alive. And so she became time’s plaything.

The final point to which all time flowed was this: Tywin Lannister came home after a day of important toymaker business, and discovered his beautiful dragon chopped up for kindling, and his son and not-wife in his bed.

Or: Tywin Lannister came home and found his son, whose lover he had stolen, and said lover in the bed which was only half his, which he had once shared with his wife, and in his dreams he still did, although in his dreams sometimes his wife was his sister and his sister was his wife.

Brienne was roused from a sated doze by a feeling of cold, and the sounds of screaming, furniture being knocked over, glass smashing. For a moment she believed herself back in her nightmare, the screams those of people being burned alive, the other sounds those of mountains toppling, mighty towers crashing to the ground, the Red Keep itself rent asunder. But then she knew herself to be in her bed, in Tywin’s house, with Jaime naked and asleep beside her, his head pillowed on her chest, cold air nipping at her flesh, seeping into her bones through her nudity, her nakedness, every inch of skin Jaime had touched and kissed and made new.

It was full night, though early still, and the people screaming were not on some distant pyre but close by, just down the upstairs landing. Brienne recognized Tysha’s voice screeching wordlessly, and Tyrion’s voice, a mighty roar from the short man, telling her to get out, to run.

“Jaime, wake up.” Brienne shook him, and he sniffed and mumbled in his sleep, tried to burrow into her stomach as into a pillow. Brienne kneeled him in the shoulder, wriggling awkwardly on the cool, damp sheets. “Wake up!”

He woke at last, heard the noise. They lay still, frozen by the incongruity between the circumstances preceding their slumber and the cacophony which greeted their awakening.

“Young man,” Jaime hissed, low and desperate. “I always thought it’d be me he killed. Or I him.”

He sprang to his feet, agile as a cat, switched on the light and was already pulling on his clothes when Brienne’s eyes adjusted to the light and she could take in the state of the room, clothes on the floor, Bear on Sansa’s cot, her bed a rumpled dueling ground with a smear of some combatant’s blood. Her blood. Her blood and Jaime’s spilled seed.

She stared at the mess between her legs for only a moment before she clambered off the bed and reached for her smallclothes and trousers. Jaime grabbed her raincoat from the back of the chair which blocked the spy-hole, and Brienne thought how irrelevant it seemed now, his spying, her indignation or lack thereof, all the tiny steps they had made in this minuet, while their bodies and souls figured out the truth, the all-absorbing simplicity of the desired dance.
They stood in her room as in a fragile eggshell, and all seven hells raged outside.

Brienne pulled on her raincoat over a sweater she grabbed from a pile of dirty laundry in the corner, pulled on her shoes without bothering with socks or shoelaces, then Jaime was taking her hand and opening the door.

The door to Tywin and Tysha’s room gaped open like a toothless mouth. The frosted glass on the bathroom door was cracked, as though someone had careered into it in headlong flight. Jaime and Brienne were alone on the landing, but Brienne had an inkling. She pulled her hand out of Jaime’s before he could stop her, and pushed the bathroom door open.

Tysha cowered inside, wedged in between the bathtub and the wall, naked but for a bed sheet wrapped around her like a garment for a much warmer climate. She had a fresh cut on her arm, her sheet soiled like the one on which Brienne and Jaime had made love, and fucked, and fallen asleep.

“Sansa,” Tysha croaked, her speaking voice like pebbles grinding together where her singing voice had been a crystal chime. “Sansa is downstairs.”

“Tywin and Tyrion?” Brienne asked, a part of her in wonderment at how calm she sounded. This was the conclusion to her night with the full moon and the apple tree, yet now she was not the one at the center of a disintegrating universe. She was the one holding the cracked eggshell together in her trembling hands.

“Workroom, I think.” Tysha stood, shivering and small and determined. “I must get Sansa.”

“Come along,” Jaime said from behind Brienne, reached out a hand to each woman.

They descended the stairs together, hand in hand in hand, and found Dog guarding the door to the back parlor like an effigy of stone, but stone which could kill. Every hair on his back stood on end, as though carved and polished to a sharp point. He sat down on the threshold when he saw who approached, and thumped his musical tail, his tongue lolling.

Tysha bent down to pet him. “Good dog, wise dog, old dog,” she murmured. Dog licked her face in recognition. Then he stepped aside and let them enter.

Sansa sat before the fireplace amidst a wreckage of strewn toys, curled up into a tiny ball, all knees and thin arms in her favorite pink dress. She uncurled when she saw Tysha.

“Auntie Tysha!” she cried and threw herself into the black-haired woman’s arms.

Tysha’s sheet fell off as she clutched Sansa to her. She was painfully thin, the firelight etching her rib cage in red and shadow, yet she looked invulnerable, armored in steel and diamonds.

“Would I part with you, my treasure?” she whispered into Sansa’s soft, red hair. Brienne could almost see her, hear her as she had been, the girl with the lovely voice and the bright doe eyes who had come to work in the toyshop one ill-omened day. Or well-omened day. Brienne couldn’t decide which just then.

The back parlor filled with wind and Tysha’s hair, like a huge flock of crows flapping out of the fireplace. *Dark wings, dark words*, yet Tysha’s words were anything but dark when she addressed Jaime and Brienne, Sansa’s blue eyes brilliant in the black maelstrom, where she rested on Tysha’s breast.

“You should leave now,” Tysha said, hieratic, majestic. “This is not your fight, my brave and noble knights.”
No wonder Tywin had felt it necessary to steal Tysha’s voice, to hobble her, Brienne thought. Had he not, she’d have destroyed him long ago.

Tysha smiled as her hair enveloped her and Sansa like black fire, and took them away from that accursed house, far away, somewhere safe.

Brienne turned to Jaime, his expression glassy-eyed and slack-jawed as he stared at the empty space before the fireplace. She touched his cheek gently to get his attention. “She’s right. We should leave now.”

He swallowed with difficulty. “Tyrion…”

“Knows what he is doing.” Brienne smiled. “Haven’t you figured it out? Your brother is smarter than the two of us put together.”

That earned her a ghost of Jaime’s customary smirk, and his hand in hers. She led him to the brown velvet curtain.

Just before they stepped through it and into the shop, Dog came hurtling past them and into the kitchen. He picked up speed, leapt up at the painting of himself over the fireplace, and vanished into it. The frame now showed only the lurid sunset over a tossing sea and a hilly shore, the basket lying abandoned in the lower right-hand corner, pink flowers spilling out of it.

Brienne waved wildly at the painting, as she had waved goodbye to Pod in his boat. “Run, Dog!” she called out. “Run home to Tarth!” The idea of Dog taking her place on her beloved island out of time warmed her heart, rent by so many losses.

“What are you doing?”

Jaime was looking at her as though she had taken leave of her senses. He had not seen Dog’s escape, or he had seen something different from what she had seen. Either was fine. Brienne shook her head, smiled, and squeezed Jaime’s hand in hers. They passed through the velvet curtain, into the shop, and from there out to the square.

Piled high with the detritus of many lives, the bonfire lit for R’hllor burned in the middle of the square like a bright yellow and red chrysanthemum. It was still sleetling, wet, heavy snow mixed with rain, but the fire had gotten hold of the wood and would not let up any time soon. Maybe it would even last till dawn and bring them all good fortune, as Tyrion had said and Mr. Florent believed.

The bonfire was strewn with broken furniture, keepsakes of loves let go, mementoes of the unloved dead. And pieces of a puppet. Brienne could just about make out the hideous mask, half madman, half dragon, wholly unnatural, perched at the very top of the pile. The fire seemed to nibble at it, slowly but surely, as though savoring a treat of boiled sugar.

“Brienne, come see,” Jaime said.

He was not looking at the bonfire. He was crouching by the street-level window which allowed the only natural light into his father’s basement workroom. Brienne joined him, peered in to see Tyrion perched in the crawlspace at the top of the puppet theatre, playing his fiddle merrily, his hands streaked with blood but no less sure on the strings and bow for all that.

“Brienne, come see,” Jaime said.

Below him, on the floor covered in red-clotted sawdust, Tywin clutched at a chisel sticking out of his stomach, just at the height where a very short man might have stabbed him. He was raving about his lovely, ruined dragon-king, raging at his inability to reach his fiddling son.
He did not notice the puppets were coming down from where he’d kept them hanging on the walls. Armless, legless, faceless, some of them perfect and finished yet all with eyes shining icy blue and hungry for the taste of life, they came on as inexorably as the morning tide. Tywin would spot them, it was only a matter of a moment, a single heartbeat before he did.

Brienne lifted her hand and knocked on the basement window, without conscious thought, without intent, and without regret. Jaime had killed the dragon-king for her, so she knocked on the window for him, knocked once, twice, three times, for Tyrion and Tysha, for all of them. She saw out of the corner of her eye how Jaime started and looked at her, felt him take her other hand and squeeze it warmly as the sound of her knocking drew Tywin’s attention away from the steadily approaching puppets.

He looked up at the window, saw Jaime and Brienne peering in at him, snarled at them in incoherent rage. Then the puppets were all around him. They drowned Tywin in their grasping limbs, hiding him from sight, their blank faces becoming smeared with his blood. The puppets had no more will of their own than they had ever had, impelled only by blind hatred and Tyrion’s jaunty music.

Tyrion looked up at the window, smiled, saluted his brother and Brienne with his fiddle bow as with a sword. Then he dropped both, fiddle and bow, into the heaving mass of hungry puppets, lifted one foot, stepped out into empty space, and vanished, much as Dog had done. The puppets fell to the floor as one, their strings cut, the battling wills which had lent them a brief semblance of life all gone.

“Come, Jaime,” Brienne whispered. “Let’s go watch the bonfire.”

He followed her like a blind man, tripping over the cobblestones, only his hand in hers seeming to keep him upright. They melded with the crowd of onlookers, neighbors all, undeterred by the sleet and the heat of the flames, the elements locked in a dance of opposites. Brienne realized that Jaime was not wearing his firefighter’s jacket, having abandoned it that morning in favor of his festive red shirt and riding breeches. She took off her raincoat and draped it over his shoulders, the sleeves of her dirty sweater becoming instantly damp with sleet. Jaime embraced her from behind, his chin resting on her shoulder, perhaps so she would not see that he was weeping. Brienne stood perfectly still, only moving her hands a little so they brushed Jaime’s thighs behind hers, the barest breath of a touch. All the others were gone, only Jaime remained to lean on her, and she let him.

“I had a brother and sister too,” Brienne told him softly, words only for him and her. “But I think they’re safe. Tysha and Tyrion and Sansa, somewhere, together. And Pod, far away at sea.”

Jaime sniffled, from the cold or from sorrow or from both. Brienne was certain with a stone-hard, fire-bright certainty that none of his tears were for his father. He tightened his arms around Brienne. “And the dog is an old dog and knows many tricks,” he said. Phrases repeated so many times they became an incantation, and therefore had power.

“I don’t want to go back inside,” Jaime said after a while, his voice steadier than before.

“We needn’t,” Brienne replied, watching the bonfire, wondering where else they could go, how they would explain the disappearance of the others and why they were still here, a young man and a girl whose blood and seed were mingled on the sheets upstairs.

Brienne wished they could bring it all out and sacrifice everything to R’hllor: Bear sitting all alone on Sansa’s empty cot, the little presents for her siblings and Tysha hidden in the unused chamber pot under Brienne’s bed, the painting of a naked, fearless Brienne concealed somewhere in Jaime’s room, everyone’s toothbrushes still in the bathroom, the clothes Tysha had been making for their Winter’s Eve presents and the choker of gold hands in their secret nooks, the toys and puppets and traces of butchery in the workroom.
She thought of the till in the shop, groaning with silver stags and gold dragons and copper stars, entire constellations of coins.

She considered how big it all was, all the unknown places, how small King’s Landing was by comparison. The others were somewhere, and she might find them again one day, might go looking or just happen to meet them, turning a street corner, stepping off a ship, shopping at a market. Brienne thought of all the invisible things she carried inside her, heavy and tear-logged, joyous and laughter-light. Tarth and the apple tree and her father’s face. Her dread of this city, of Tywin, of the dragon-king. Her love (an aching, throbbing thing) for Sansa and Pod and Tysha and Tyrion. And Jaime. And Jaime.

Jaime shifted, slipped around to face her, lithe and dancer-quick despite his sadness. Reached up to caress her face and damp hair, her raincoat slipping off his shoulder to trail on the slippery, muddy cobblestones. His eyes were red-rimmed and green and brilliant, beloved. “You already lost everything once,” he said gently.

Brienne shook her head in certain, intangible knowledge, not some vague and wild surmise. “Not everything.”

She cupped his cheek in her hand. Jaime leaned into her touch, his eyes open, blinking, eyelashes stroking her palm. One half of his face was hot and stubbly and wet, the other half etched in warm light and tremulous shadow by the bonfire. Sleet melted in his hair and twinkled like captive stars. Brienne suspected she would never get used to his beauty, to how she could touch him and not ruin him. He pressed a kiss to the heel of her hand, and her free hand tangled with his, their fingers bruised, scorched, scarred. They were in a crowd of neighbors, strangers, all of them intent on the dancing bonfire, ignorant of the young man and woman who had emerged from the dark and silent toyshop.

Alone with the night and the fire, they faced each other, poised on the edge of something big (time itself) opening out before them.

Chapter End Notes

Well, folks, it has been a real pleasure writing this and thinking this and reading all of your comments and thoughts and speculations on this. I’m kinda sad to let this fic go, but it’s a good place to leave J&B to face their future.

If anyone wants to know more about The Magic Toyshop but doesn’t have time to read it, or maybe just wants to watch the (extremely difficult to find) film version, a kind soul uploaded it on youtube. Enjoy!

Just remember, as Ramsay Snow did not quite say: if you were expecting a conventional happy ending, you haven’t been paying attention.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!