**Memento of Love**

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**Memento of Love**

by AlynnaStrong

**Summary**

At the behest of his father, Jaime Lannister is this year’s Westerosi Bachelor. Many noble ladies will vie for his attention, plus one who will pretend she doesn’t care. I won’t keep you in suspense about who he chooses.

**Notes**

1) The story structure will be on the weird side because we’re going to do this *Memento* style. That means first you’ll see the ending, then we’ll bounce all the way back to the beginning. Each update will ping pong with the first half going backward and the second half going forward until the last chapter, when the timelines meet in the middle for a reveal that will put some things into context. Otherwise, how am I supposed to generate any dramatic tension? You already know how the decision is going to go right now before you’ve read a word. It’s in the tags.

2) I’ve never watched the Bachelor, but I have watched a season-long parody of the Bachelor, so I should be fine, right? Kidding… I know I’m going to make so many mistakes. This embarrasses me; please have mercy. I’m just trying to bring some more J/B sweetness to the world.
Week 7 & Week 1

Week 7 (Finale)

Jaime Lannister had been a champion athlete, a soldier, a philanthropist, a diplomat (honorary), and today he would add espoused lord to the list. He never expected to marry; happy to lead a life of public service and eschew domestic duties. However, his father’s advancing age led to a panic that none of the Lannister children stood ready to carry on the family name. Since even modern Westeros tended to subsume the bride into her husband’s family, Cersei would be no help. Lord Tywin counted Tyrion as a lost cause. Therefore, he called upon Jaime to endure the spectacle of publicly selecting a bride from a dozen of the realm’s most eligible young women. His final two possibilities waited for him in a faux garden setting on the soundstage, both anxious about whom he would choose.

Brienne Tarth plainly couldn’t believe she’d gotten this far. More than once during the process she’d begged him to send her home if it was all the set up for a joke. He snapped the last time she said so and yelled, “If you really think I could be so cruel, maybe you should go home!” She’d examined him, over-seriously as usual, thinking deeply behind those clear, beautiful eyes and said, “I don’t.” Her ability to see him as an honorable man, despite everything she had learned about his past, made him feel born anew.

Brienne wore a sleeveless dress draped with a sheer shawl. Jaime could almost hear her arguing with the wardrobe department about it. They wanted her as exposed as possible; she wanted to cover up, to hide her bulging muscles and freckled skin. He was on wardrobe’s side, to be honest. Without question they’d gotten the color right. The cerulean blue of the dress would make her eyes pop to a degree that the home audience would think their televisions needed color correction.

Nymeria Sand kept her cool much better. The daughter of Oberyn Martell and a high noblewoman from the vaunted city of Volantis, handling high-stress situations was second nature to her. As an bastard, she had also grown accustomed to being mocked not only behind her back but also to her face. She wouldn’t twitch an eyebrow at any abuse, but Jaime knew she never forgot a slight. She would make the perfect political wife for his circumstances.

Nymeria dressed in the clinging silks so customary to Dorne. They paradoxically emphasized every curve and crevice while almost completely concealing her from neck to toe. The vivid scarlet piped with gold seemed unsubtle, clearly calling to mind the Lannister house colors, but Jaime supposed the audience would eat it up.

Even their fathers looked nervous. Lord Tarth needed a suitable husband for his daughter if he wanted to keep the ancestral castle within the family. Brienne had proven stubborn about rejecting unworthy suitors. She would rather die a maid and have the title pass away from the Tarth family than bind herself to someone who didn’t appreciate her. Lord Oberyn Martell had different concerns. Marriage to Nymeria would symbolize an elevation of illegitimate children in the eyes of the public. Considering the number of bastards he had sired, his personal sympathies were understandable. With so many laws still giving preference to children born in wedlock, the heir to a high noble house marrying a Sand would show such practices to be archaic.

Varys, the imperturbable host, pursed his lips at Jaime and spread his arms wide. His silk robe, the most elaborately brocaded one yet, billowed from his arms. “Jaime Lannister, I see you. Ladies and gentleman, I believe our bachelor is feeling shy. Let’s give him a round of applause to encourage him to come on out here.”
Jaime gamely jogged out from the wings to stand beside Varys. After waving to the audience, he bowed to each of the ladies. He had waited backstage as endless highlight reels played from the season-long ordeal. Some of the situations had been edited almost beyond recognition. Villains rose and fell; true reasons for dismissals were obscured. The editors cannily managed not to make either of the ladies before him seem too perfect or too damaged.

“Ladies, do you have any last words for Ser Jaime before he makes his decision? Lady Brienne, let’s start with you,” Varys said.

“Jaime, I hope you chose me, not just for my sake but also for yours. We can support each other and fill in the pieces the other is missing. We fit together in a way that complements our strengths and reinforces our weaknesses.” She would have gone on, but the wolf-whistling from the crowd gave her pause. Encouraged by the editing on their solo dates, the audience interpreted her pleas to be of a sexual nature.

“Thank you Miss Tarth. Food for thought. And now, Miss Sand?”

“Ser Lannister, you know what I bring to the table. How I can satisfy every desire you have for the future. I have told you; just say the word and I will show you.” The crowd whistled for her as well, though Jaime reflected that she had insinuated herself to be more innocent than her competition. Surely anyone with eyes could see the ridiculousness of that.

Varys shifted the focus back to the man of the hour. “Ser Jaime, do you have anything to say?”

Jaime had rehearsed his speech many, many times. No part of it would be easy, but finally putting the words out there would be a relief. “Brienne, Nymeria, and all the ladies who have been a part of the competition, it has been a pleasure getting to know you. I’ve learned a lot about myself, and how to consider not only what I want, but also what I need to have a bright future. The decision was a true struggle for me; I understand it was hard on you as well, and I thank you for your patience.”

“Well,” Varys said, “that sounds like you have, perchance, a question you would like to ask one of the ladies?”

“I do.”

“Then, why are we still waiting?” Varys asked, clapping his hands. He stepped back so Jaime was alone in the spotlight.

“W-” Jaime swallowed and tried again. What had emerged at first was a strangled, unsure sound, and he wouldn’t have her think he was anything but certain. “With this star, I pledge my love, and ask that you be my wife. Will you accept… Brienne?”

Brienne blinked and looked down, a little slow to react. She probably wanted to make sure she heard correctly, that she didn’t humiliate herself by stepping forward when the other name had been called. Still speechless, she looked into his eyes, and he gave her a little nod.

“Yes,” she said, not quite a question. When he smiled (in what he would deny was relief), she said it again more firmly with an answering smile of her own.

Nymeria Sand could be heard breathing loudly, but her expression did not crack. She stood stock still until the camera panned into the live audience and production assistants could lead her backstage.

The glow that lit Brienne’s face and the pure joy on Jaime’s as they kissed – clumsily tender on her part, surprisingly passionate on his – showed the audience that indeed the best woman had won.
Jaime could see the contestants milling around the ballroom, but he was not allowed to meet with any of them before the competition officially began. Of course, he knew many by reputation, but they were too young for him to have met in his travels. The first event was to be a semi-formal dance. The director encouraged him to mingle for a few minutes with each girl, then move on. He should make sure to greet them individually, but avoid focusing too much time on anyone in particular at this stage. The goal was to see how he interacted with them, so that tomorrow he could eliminate four. That would provide for a dramatic opening ceremony while sweeping away the ladies for whom he felt no attraction.

Some of the eliminations were obvious. Yara Greyjoy, for one, was not even pretending to be interested in him. She was too busy chatting up the other prospects. He didn’t need any vixens in his henhouse, thank you. Walda Frey was another. He wasn’t even sure which Walda this was – Lord Frey’s daughter or one of his granddaughters. Whichever, she had the personality of dishwater. Besides, the Freys were such a numerous house that they’d sent two contestants. Roslin was far lovelier and livelier than her sister (or niece or whatever).

A dance spent with each of Meera Reed and Dacey Mormont placed them on the short list for elimination as well. Both were pleasant young women and led interesting lives, but Jaime didn’t think they’d be suited for life anywhere near Casterly Rock and the thriving city of Lannisport. They loved the outdoors and rustic aesthetics and would be miserable having to settle for a hunting trip every season or so. Also, Meera was less than half his age, and Dacey had been known as the Lionslayer in school. It had to do with field hockey, but still sounded like a bad omen.

Sansa Stark, Arianne Martell, and Margaery Tyrell each received a full dance for form’s sake, but everyone knew they would advance to the next round. He had nothing against any of them, and he didn’t want to give his father a stroke by eliminating someone from a high house unseemly early. In fact, Tywin had asked him to treat Dorne generously since political matters were shaky with them at the moment. That meant he should pass Nymeria Sand through as well. He grinned, considering that while she was quite attractive, Tywin might not have meant to include a bastard in the potentials.

Myranda Royce, the Vale’s sole representative, had a wicked sense of humor. She looked more like a best friend than a lady wife, but Jaime thought she’d keep morale up at the Maidenvault, the hotel where the women were housed. Missandei, the immigrant from Essos, probably couldn’t go the distance due to lack of political support. Jaime would keep her around for a while, though, just for her calming manner and musical accent.

Another of the long shots loomed nearby. She’s taller than me, Jaime noted, amused. She also seemed shy, and Jaime suspected she must have lost a fight with the wardrobe department because she kept pulling down on the hem of her dress. Wardrobe hadn’t wanted him to miss her legs, apparently, which did seem quite muscular and firm. Speaking of firm, he needed to tear his gaze away. Ha! So many women, my body is getting confused about my tastes.

After a few deep breaths, he remembered her name: Brienne Tarth. She hadn’t looked so tall on the production stills, nor so hopelessly unattractive. Well, there was no call to be rude; Jaime
approached her and asked if she’d like to dance. She swayed with him in silence, though with an undeniable grace to her movements.

“You don’t have to say anything, Ser. I’m only here as a favor to a friend,” she said, once the cameras moved away.

“Really?” Jaime flashed her a charming smile. He’d send her away tomorrow, and she seemed to know it, but he should look like he was trying to enjoy himself. Father had warned him against appearing shallow.

“Yes, for my friend, Sansa. Sansa Stark, the lovely redhead? She said she’d only try out if I did as well. I was more surprised than anyone when they passed me through. I can’t imagine why, really. What they possibly saw… comic relief, I suppose.” She shrugged, and Jaime had to wonder if the bodice of her dress was going to rip from the pull of her muscles.

“Oh, you don’t seem that funny to me,” Jaime said and patted her arm. He meant to move on, but from her pinched expression, that had not been the right thing to say. His remark was supposed to come across as ‘clever,’ but he’d misjudged his aim and hit ‘asshole.’

“I’m sorry. I meant to say not to sell yourself short. You truly do stand out. Someone less a gentleman than myself may have spent a bit too long staring at your legs.” Godsdamnit body! Now? Really?

His apology seemed to break something loose in her. She said, “Could I ask the tiniest of favors? I know you get to eliminate four of us tomorrow – the ones you don’t feel any chemistry with – and certainly I expect to be among them.” She gulped a breath, trying to steady herself. “Would you not say my name first? It doesn’t make any difference about anything. It would just be nice not to be the obvious first pick to go.”

Jaime looked into her eyes, hopeful and quite astonishingly blue. His brother, Tyrion, flashed through his mind. Tyrion, chosen last for every sports team and left standing alone at every school dance. He’d made light of it at first, but eventually the jokes rang very hollow, the constant rejection having taken its toll on his brother’s spirit. Jaime squeezed the giantess’ hand. “Not first, I promise.”

“Thank you,” she said with a gentle smile.

Nice girl. Wretchedly homely, but nice, Jaime thought.

Jaime ran his fingers over the box of mementos he would distribute to the women as they were chosen to stay. Each was a seven pointed star cast in gold. By the seventh week, one lucky woman would have seven of them, thus ordaining a marriage blessed by the gods. Jaime couldn’t help but wonder how the ones who came up short would feel. Would they buy two or three or more extra to complete the set? At least he’d talked the producers out of presenting actual figures of the gods. They’d wanted to start with the Stranger. Brrr; he did not like the symbolism of that.

“Ser, are you ready?” The production assistant, a star-stuck young man named Podrick Payne asked.

“Yes, I think so,” Jaime said. He had some butterflies, but if his tournament performances were any indication, they’d disappear in short order. On the other hand, in tournaments he was allowed to be properly dressed for battle. Here, he was forced to dress like his father in a suit and tie, the
opposite of the life he most enjoyed.

“The ah, the pr-producers said—” Podrick began.

“There are some they don’t want me to pick?” Jaime knew the behind the scenes crew would have some influence, and at this early stage he didn’t even mind. They’d interviewed the girls and researched them extensively; he’d only had one conversation with most of them.

“Just, uh, Tyrell and Stark, should stay. Ser. For a while.”

Jaime snorted. As if he’d humiliate the powerhouses of Highgarden or Winterfell with an early elimination. Just because he was no politician didn’t mean he was a complete babe in the woods. Besides, both girls were attractive with lovely personalities.

“No worries. It’s to be Reed, Greyjoy, Walda Frey, and Tarth,” he said.

Podrick nodded. The senior producer, Lord Baelish, overheard and clapped a hand onto Jaime’s shoulder. “Good, though Tarth probably shouldn’t be last. That’s hardly suspenseful.”

The women waited, lined up in two rows, for Jaime to take his mark. Most of them were fairly indistinguishable at this distance, all little black dresses and perfectly coiffed hair. Tarth, the odd duck, stood head and shoulders above the rest. They’d put her in the back, but she was still impossible to miss.

Jaime strode out trying to look like he was having fun. This was far more stressful that he’d expected; he couldn’t imagine being one of the ladies.

Varys, the plump and over-powdered host, finished up his lavish introduction to applause from the studio audience. The on-site crowd was quite small, but with the magic of audio manipulation, it would sound like an arena. Varys put a silk-robed arm around Jaime’s shoulder.

“Now Ser Jaime, some say this is the most painful ceremony because you must send four of our fair maidens home to their fathers. Shall we start with some good news, though?”

“Indeed.” Jaime drew forth one of the stars. “Arianne Martell, will you accept this token of faithfulness?” Being the first chosen should count as being generous to Dorne. She accepted, of course. As did Sansa Stark, Margaery Tyrell, and Missandei – the last thrown into the mix early as a surprise.

“Now, shall we deliver a bit of bad news?” Varys asked, his face twisted into a mournful expression.

“I’m afraid so.” Jaime rather wished the ladies he didn’t pick could just leave, but they had to stay while he explained why they weren’t chosen. That seemed worse for everyone, in his opinion. “Meera Reed. I do not have a token for you this evening. Your youth and your hobbies make us a poor match, I fear.” Too late, he realized he’d already passed through Missandei who was even younger. Oh well, surely they all knew that if he was going to chose a northerner, it’d have to be Sansa Stark.

“Also, Yara Greyjoy, I do not have a token for you tonight. I don’t think I could take the competition.” Let the audience make of that what they may. From her saucy wink, she got it.

“Shall we return to the happier tidings?” Varys asked.

“Let’s. Nymeria Sand, would you accept this token of faithfulness?” She did, with an overly long
caress of his hand. Myranda Royce squealed, and Roslin Frey curtseyed as they were subsequently presented with theirs.

“Now, we’re down to the final three of the evening. You can only keep one of these lovely maidens, I’m sorry to say,” Varys intoned with impressive smoothness.

Brienne Tarth, Walda Frey, and Dacey Mormont were prompted to step forward and stand close together. Brienne was blushing such a bright shade of pink Jaime found it kind of adorable. He wondered if she was reconsidering her request not to go out first now that she’d been made the center of attention.

“Walda Frey,” Jaime began, and she looked up at him with such hope that he felt guilty even though he’d never met the woman before today. “I’m afraid I do not have a token for you tonight.” Her expression crashed and lower lip wobbled. Jaime stumbled to come up with an explanation. “I didn’t feel we had much in common,” he concluded flimsily.

Brienne looked so happy. She wasn’t exactly smiling, but her eyes were sparkling. He’d more than lived up to his promise. Jaime scrambled to come up with a good reason to send her away. She’s not very pretty? That would sound far too shallow. She was quite interesting really, and had a kind personality, and... oh screw it. I have too many northerners anyway.

“Brienne Tarth, would you accept this token of faithfulness?” She kept her chin high, but was surely anticipating different words because she didn’t hold out her hand right away. Question marks practically danced above her head. Again, adorable. Finally, after some throat clearing from off-set, she reached for the golden star.

“Thank you,” she said, so quietly that the director would have to make her repeat the line in post.

“Dacey Mormont, I’m sorry but I don’t have a token for you tonight. We both live very full lives, and I don’t think they would mesh together all that well.”

Jaime thought he heard laughter from the crew as Podrick led Brienne back to the Maidenvault. Let them laugh. He had an idea.
Week 6 & Week 2

**Week 6 (Final Three)**

**Remaining:** Brienne, Nymeria, and Margaery

They were coming down to the wire now. Jaime knew that the three remaining women were his most serious prospects, and each brought a different matrix of pluses and minuses into play. His mission this week was to woo each of them over a formal one-on-one dinner date. It would be his last chance to get to know more about his future bride; all the events after this were highly staged and uninformative. Other bachelors had been allowed to step away from the engagement before the marriage occurred, but Jaime was quite sure that if he tried it, he’d be disinherited. At this point, he’d almost come around on the idea of marriage, though. Some of his daydreams about it looked rather fun. Perhaps he would even satisfy his father and present him with tall, blonde grandchildren someday.

Jaime tried his best, he really did, but diplomacy was never his forte. Both Nymeria Sand and Margaery Tyrell talked rings around him during their dinners. Nymeria made all the expected points about herself while subtly planting seeds of doubt about her opponents. She would never come out and say that Brienne was an ugly embarrassment that would make high society think Jaime had lost his reason, but somehow he knew that was exactly her position. Likewise, Margaery was an ambitious social climber who would divorce him the second a Baratheon slot opened up. Again, Nymeria never said any of those words, but they assembled themselves in his head like magic. For her part, Margaery merely adopted a mirror-like pose and dodged every probing question. Somehow, Jaime found himself doing all the talking, and came out of the meal feeling like he’d gone to ten therapy sessions in a row.

Dinner with Brienne was his last shot to actually learn something about any of them. She entered the restaurant already looking disgruntled, and Jaime could understand why. Apparently no amount of yelling at wardrobe this week would result in a dress longer than mid-thigh. Sleeves were a pipe dream. She was surprisingly good at walking in high heels, though, considering how little she needed them.

He rose to greet her and to let the audience take in his new bespoke suit. Wardrobe had set it out for their date; navy blue instead of black, it matched her dress. They hadn’t done so for the others, but then again, Nymeria wore red and Margaery green, so that would have looked odd.

“How are you? Anything new occur to you since our last outing?” Jaime asked.

“All is well and the same as we left it before,” Brienne said. Her nerves were showing, the realization dawning that she was a genuine contender to win.

“No deep, dark secrets to confess, or are you truly pure as the driven snow?” Jaime gently teased, trying to help her loosen up.

“Well, I did break the jaw of the last man who proposed to me, but I assure you it won’t happen again,” she said.

Jaime guffawed. *Perfect! The producers will love that!*

Encouraged by his laughter, she continued, “In my defense, he did hit me first.”

Jaime’s laughter stopped with an abruptness, and a stormy expression built on his face. “Then he
was certainly no gentleman,” Jaime ground out through gritted teeth.

For her dinner, Brienne ordered what the production assistant, Podrick, had told her to. It was a strange detail to act out, but she supposed they had their reasons. Jaime was pleased to see they had his favorite meal on the menu this evening and tickled that Brienne ordered it first. A future of endless nights of filet mignon with Bearnaise sauce danced through his mind.

After enjoying his wonderfully prepared steak, Jaime was ready to dive into the issues that the producers wanted him to bring up.

“So, and I’ve asked this of everyone,” he said clearly, “If I decide to select someone other than yourself, who should I choose?”

He wouldn’t have bothered asking if they didn’t need it on film, Brienne knew, so she played along. “If you don’t pick me, I think your best choice is Margaery Tyrell. She is beautiful and cultured, just like you.”

“I think Nymeria and I are more alike,” Jaime said. At Brienne’s eye roll, he continued, “Even you and I are. We both strive to live up to our ideals and support those who can’t help themselves. And you’re almost as strong as me.”

“Almost? Anyway, would you rather have a woman who can bench press you or one who would look nice on your arm? Be realistic.”

“I am.” (And he definitely didn’t want to get into the logistics of the bench pressing idea. Not while wearing tight pants). “It’s much more about personality than looks. I’m almost forty years old; I am more aware than anyone that beauty is temporary. I need someone who can put up with me, relate to me, keep me amused as we grow old. I like the way you and I are together. That’s the truth. We can talk, or you’ll listen to me talk, at least, and it’s very comfortable.”

“I like that part of it too. Even if – and I know people always say this, but I mean it – even if you don’t choose me, I hope we can still be friends. Occasionally we could go out and do things together… chaperoned by your wife, I suppose. But I deserve a chance to kick your ass at basketball again, because you are such a cheater.”

“Fouls are part of the game, wench, I told you,” he replied with the thoughtless ease he’d come to love. “ Seriously though, I have to ask you about your competitors. The producers make me. They like a little trash talk, and you are frustratingly nice. So try, okay.”

He pulled back and started again, a fresh camera-ready take. “Is there anything I should know about Nymeria or Margaery while I’m pondering my decision?”

“Nymeria is not heir to any estate. At least I bring you Tarth,” Brienne said haltingly and far too based in politics rather than emotion to be interesting to the audience.

“Yes, but anything about her character? You live with her most of the day. Surely you’ve some juicy tidbits to share,” he said, as if she hadn’t told him quite a bit already, none of which had been recorded or would be proper to air.

“Well, her… morals could be… better. I feel like her influence is sort of corrupting.”

Jaime nodded, encouraging her to go on.

“She… she’s mean. She cuts everyone down behind their back. Not you; the other contestants,” Brienne clarified, unable to keep from straightening the record even about her fiercest rival.
Jaime supposed they could edit that into something. “And Margaery?”

“Margaery is truly in love,” she said and snapped her mouth shut. Jaime could tell that Brienne would give him no more on Margaery. Her motives were transparent – if he didn’t choose her, she wanted him to choose Margaery – which he was starting to understand was her style. She’d disadvantage herself to save someone else, even someone less worthy.

Jaime’s three remaining ladies gathered to hear their fate. Two would go on the finale next week, where he’d choose one for his bride. Varys built up the moment for all it was worth.

“Now Jaime, which of these lucky ladies is the first to go back to the Maidenvault for a nice, relaxing evening?”

“Brienne, would you accept this token of my faithfulness?” She took it with a grateful nod, sweeping her eyes toward Margaery in one last act of advocacy.

Jaime did not notice that the audience reacted with warm applause rather than shock at his selection this time. Brienne had moved into a slight lead over Margaery in the bookmaker’s predictions. They might not understand what he saw in her, but they’d noticed he never hesitated when he said her name. For his part, Jaime chose her first because a secret part of him hoped he was wrong about Margaery.

Brienne rarely, if ever, lied; that was the key. She’d said Margaery was in love and promptly shut up. What she hadn’t said was that Margaery was in love with him.

Margaery scanned the audience looking for support. She smiled slightly, and – there it was – her eyes softened into molten brown pools. She’d fallen in love during the competition all right, just with her roommate rather than the purported prize. A quick glance backward showed Sansa Stark watching stoically, her grey eyes pinned on Margaery.

“Margaery, I’m sorry. I do not have a token for you tonight. But I’m sure, I’m very sure, that the right person for you is out there this very moment.”

Her eyes narrowed and she even managed a smile. “I pray you’re right, Ser. I enjoyed my time here very much.”

“Nymeria, will you accept this token of my faithfulness?” Jaime asked. It was anticlimactic, but mixing it up for the audience kept them engaged, he’d been told.

Nymeria grasped the star with a knowing wink.

Week 2 (Group Date)
Remaining: Brienne, Sansa, Margaery, Arianne, Nymeria, Myranda, Missandei, and Roslin

“Okay girls, ready to have some fun?” Varys asked with a fake giggle. He wore a linen version of his customary robe and carried a large picnic basket as he led the women to their outing. The
contestants knew that they were to have a group date with Ser Jaime this evening, but had been kept in the dark about anything else.

“We’ll all be seeing a romantic movie under the stars. Who knows what could happen?” Varys enthused.

The ladies saw that an enormous projection screen now hung between two trees in the lawn outside, and the entire rear courtyard had been cordoned off to provide a park-like atmosphere. The ambiance was hardly convincing to the contestants, however, because rigging and microphones hung all around, just out of frame of the cameras.

“There’s popcorn, candy, and a very lonely man waiting for you on the blankets. Go get him!” Varys encouraged them.

Jaime heard Varys and the women chattering as they neared his position. He could gauge how forward the ladies were based on how eagerly they approached. Not surprisingly, the Dornish were in the lead, followed by those from more humble houses, with the most proper ladies from ancient houses demurely trailing behind. The girl he’d given the final reprieve to last week, Brienne, came last of all, carrying some heavy-looking equipment for a grateful PA. He shook his head and thought ‘typical,’ then wondered why he’d think so.

Before the day’s filming began, the producers asked Jaime to let them get a few shots of him surrounded by the women all pampering him like a Dothraki khal. He didn’t love the idea at first; in truth, he’d never been much for playing the field and didn’t want to present that image. It turned out not to be too onerous in practice. Nymeria Sand was a bit vulgar in encouraging him to rest his head in her lap, but overall it was mainly a tight framing of them all huddled together with one or another of the ladies occasionally pressing a treat into his mouth.

Of course, everyone understood that watching the movie was the least of the goals for the evening. It was a forgettable, product-placed romantic comedy anyway about two idiots who could not be more in love but take forever to realize it. There were several isolated spots set up in the fake garden where he could bring a lady for a private chat. He knew the cameras would record the meetings, but not all of the areas had been wired for sound.

A fairly trembly Brienne was his first choice to separate from the herd. For their first outing, she was dressed in denim pants that buttoned just below the knee and a loose blouse that hid the fact she had essentially no bosom. She won this round with wardrobe, he thought. He invited her to sit on a checkered blanket situated beneath the drooping branches of a weeping willow.

“I suppose you’re surprised to still be here?” he asked once they’d gotten comfortable.

“It was a nice surprise,” she granted. “Was that it? A twist for the viewers? Or a joke? Dacey’s so much prettier than me.”

“Perhaps, but she wanted to win. You don’t, or at least you’re not trying. You’re only here thanks to your friend.”

“She would make an excellent match for you. Just think: the wealth of the Lannisters united with the loyalty of the Starks.”

Jaime grinned. He could already tell this woman knew something about loyalty. “Okay; let’s put that on hold for a moment. I have a proposal. You are going to be living with these women 24/7. Help me weed out the ones who are inappropriate. I won’t expect you to say a bad word against your girl, Sansa, but please, take a look at the rest. Let me know who is only here because her
father’s making her.” At this, he gently poked Brienne’s knee. At least, he’d swear he aimed for her knee rather than inner thigh. “Or 100% for politics, with no intention of developing any affection. Or who intends to pour poison in my wine at the first opportunity. In recompense, you get to stay here and be feted, dolled up by makeup and wardrobe every week. It’s bound to draw out some admirers for you once, you know…”

“Once you’re down to the serious prospects.”

Jaime half-shrugged. “For what it’s worth, I hope you stay a while. It’s nice having someone I can just talk to, let my guard down with a bit.”

“Well, alright. You seem decent enough. I don’t suppose I’d want someone to poison your wine.”

“My lady! The depth of your love embarrasses me. We barely know one another.”

“Stop,” she said blushing. She pushed him, which he saw coming, but harder than he anticipated. He rolled onto his back laughing. This attracted the attention of a few of the more observant contestants, so regretfully, Jaime’s peaceful interlude was at an end.

At the star ceremony, Jaime named Brienne in his first group of potential brides who would remain for the next week. This surprised even the usually unflappable Varys, who shot Jaime a ‘did you misspeak’ look. In response, Jaime blew a kiss towards the ladies as they were led into the wings. Brienne deserved her reward for doing her duty.

The previous night, Jaime pulled her aside for a quick conversation. She said that she hadn’t uncovered anyone plotting assassination and tried to bow out. He could tell she was hiding something, though. He’d teased, taunted, and frankly pestered her until she told him of the contestant who’d fallen in love with one of the bodyguards.

“Don’t be angry with her; this is a very stressful ordeal. She’s far from home and didn’t have anyone to turn to,” she said.

“I’m not angry. You’re sure this is more than a fling?”

“She says they’re in love. But they haven’t done anything!” Brienne assured him.

“I understand. Thank you.”

“Anyway,” she added, clearly feeling guilty about tattling on her fellow contestant, “you should ask her. How do you know I’m not making this up to sink a promising competitor?”

“I can already tell that’s not your style. But if it will make you feel better, I promise to bring it up with her.”

Jaime grumbled at himself as Brienne slunk away. Now he would actually have to talk to the girl. She was too young anyway – he ought to just send her home – but Brienne would be cross with him if he broke his promise. The more Jaime thought about it, the more he regretted it. He could come off looking very sketchy indeed if he were caught cornering the young woman, speaking intensely with her, and then sending her away as if disappointed with the results of the conversation.

In a surge of inspiration, Jaime brought along the wardrobe supervisor, Olyvar, an old friend from his days in the capital. Olyvar was journalistic in his gossiping ethics. He would spread any
observations of his own far and wide with absolutely no shame. However, anything he learned from a discreet conversation couldn’t be extracted from him with red hot pincers. Jaime asked him to please re-check Missandei’s measurements for her gown while witnessing their private chat.

“Missandei, I hope you’re enjoying your time here,” Jaime said.

Her wide-set amber eyes regarded him carefully. “I am.” She sounded perhaps the slightest bit wary, but with her accent it was difficult to tell.

“Is that because of me or someone else?”

She only glanced down for an instant, but it was enough. Jaime knew that Brienne had seen the truth. “I should have said something, Ser, but I didn’t know how.”

“It’s fine.” He held out his palms in a placating manner. “The choice isn’t only mine; it’s yours as well. If you wish to court someone else, just say so. At least some of the women want to be here, I hope. Let’s be sure to give them their fair chance.”

“You’ll send me home?”

“If that’s what you want. I won’t humiliate you in the dismissal if you don’t humiliate me in the exit interview. Deal?”

“Yes. Deal.” Jaime felt like he saw her real smile, rather than her purely diplomatic one, for the first time.

That evening, Jaime’s final two were Roslin Frey and Missandei. He went through the pantomime of choosing Roslin, who accepted his star gracefully and with a sisterly hug for Missandei as she departed.

“Missandei, as you can see, I do not have a token for you tonight. Someone as special as you will not go long without a suitor begging for your hand. I trust that there’s a handsome young man watching you even now.”

She dipped her head, well attuned to the sophisticated nuances of language. “I appreciate that Ser Jaime. Your special lady is watching too; I know it.”
**Week 5 & Week 3**

**Week 5 (Immunity)**

**Remaining:** Brienne, Nymeria, Margaery, and Myranda

“We need to talk,” Brienne urgently ran up to Jaime and pulled him behind a line of shrubbery. He put up some resistance, but she managed to sweep him along with her anyway.

It got his heart racing, Jaime had to admit. He took in her frantic state and bit back several responses that ranged from prurient teasing to blatant come-ons. “What is it?” he asked.

“I know the schedule calls for you to take us all for a romantic sail in the harbor, but there’s a twist. Before we leave, there’s to be an archery competition, where the winner gets immunity from elimination. I… I… I will win easily,” she said, having no time for false modesty.

“Okay?” he inquired, confused. She generally wasn’t much of a braggart.

“Like I told you before, everyone,” she cast her eyes down, “everyone left is for real. Margaery, Myranda, even Nymeria, they all genuinely want to be your wife. They all love you.”

“That’s great to know, Brienne. Thank you.”

“Everyone here now loves you,” she repeated. Her speech sped up as she tried to get out what she needed to say. “But if you want me to throw the competition, I will. I mean, it would be a week’s respite, right? You kick me off so you could have more time to think and make the right choice among the serious prospects.”

Jaime took in her bitter scowl and finally realized what she was trying to say. Everyone.

“You don’t consider yourself a serious prospect.”

“I don’t know exactly what you’re looking for, but surely it’s not… me.”

“I wouldn’t be here if I had managed to figure out what I wanted on my own. I’m learning a lot about myself, some of it rather surprising to me. A man does not always know all of his own tastes.” Jaime noticed that wardrobe had dressed her in a reasonable top – a striped blouse that she could cover up with a matching sweater if the breeze became too chilly once they were on the water. However, for pants they’d given her leggings so tight they might as well be body paint and a sheer, wrap-around skirt that more drew attention to a certain area than covered it. He could only conclude that Olyvar was literally trying to kill him.

“So you won’t be angry with me if I win? Or, you know, take it out on me; turn me into a laughingstock later?”

“You think I’d set you up to turn your affection into a joke in front of an audience?”

“I- I don’t know,” she mumbled. *You wouldn’t be the first*, she couldn’t bring herself to say.

“If you really think I could be so cruel, maybe you should go home!” he snapped. He’d hoped she could see some good in him even after last week, but perhaps that was too much to ask. He wouldn’t force her to stay here if she’d decided – not unreasonably – that he was too toxic.

Brienne broke out of her struggle with self doubt to see Jaime glaring at her with hurt in his eyes.
She replayed his words. He was guilty of many indiscretions, to be sure, but he’d never lied to her or played her for a fool. She did him an injustice by implying that he would. “I don’t,” she said. “I trust you.”

They faced each other for a moment, breathing heavily, getting their emotions under control.

“Good. So if you want the immunity, win it. I’ll be disappointed if you don’t now. After all, I’m worth fighting for.” Jaime made a show of preening that was only half pretend.

“Alright, then.” Brienne squared her shoulders and prepared to take her place with the other contestants.

“Alright. Wait! Have you talked to Sansa? Is she okay?”

“Yes, she’s well. I mean, she’s obviously upset, but she understands it wasn’t your doing. I think she even appreciates the way you handled it.”

Jaime felt a knot untie in his stomach. He’d done one thing right here, at least. He playfully mocked Brienne, “Look at you; sneaking over to the eliminated side to talk to your friend. Someone who didn’t know you might think you’re a real rebel.”

“We’re discouraged from associating with the eliminated contestants, but it’s not against the rules per se,” she said primly. All the contestants were kept sequestered until the season’s filming was complete; otherwise the bookmakers would revolt.

“What’s going on over there? Wailing and gnashing of teeth mainly?” he asked.

“Uh, truth be told I don’t think anyone is terribly unhappy. There’s lots of alcohol, and apparently Yara Greyjoy does a very nice job of easing the pains of rejection.”

“Oh for- I played right into her hands, didn’t I?”

“I believe I once heard her call it a ‘one for him; ten for me’ situation.”

“Well that’s just great.”

“She hasn’t gotten all of them.”

Jaime snorted. “Give her time.”

As it turned out, Margaery Tyrell had been a competitive archer while in school and gave Brienne a real challenge. It all came down to the final shots on target. Nervous sweat ran down Brienne’s temples (mostly from worrying that Jaime would think she wasn’t trying), and her last shot was well off-center. Had Margaery not been distracted by poor, butterfingered Podrick dropping a klieg light in the background, the Highgarden heiress would surely have won. She jerked as she released though, allowing Brienne to narrowly edge her out for the immunity. Brienne glanced at Jaime from the corner of her eye and was relieved to see him smiling warmly.

“How dramatic!” Varys said. “Now we all know who gets to watch the ceremony tonight with a light heart. Ser Jaime, your job just got a good deal more difficult,” he said with sympathy.

Jaime couldn’t really say that he agreed.

When they returned from the cruise for the evening’s filming, Jaime found an unexpected visitor in
Lord Tywin Lannister stood proudly and impeccably dressed as always. He shouldn’t be here; the bachelor was held essentially in stasis from the rest of the world. However, Lord Lannister had his ways.

“Son, how goes the competition?” he asked.

“Good. I’m down to four. They’re all lovely,” Jaime said.

“I thought perhaps you’d welcome the advice of your progenitor.”

Ah, of course. After last week I should have seen this coming. Jaime felt a wave of hopelessness. His father was going to choose after all. That means I may as well get used to the idea of Margaery Lannister.

“Yes, father, by all means. Let me hear your input.”

“Send Myranda Royce home. Other than that, I don’t care.”

“What’s wrong with-? You don’t care? Wait, what?” Jaime stuttered. This wasn’t making a great deal of sense.

“Myranda Royce does us no favors. She brings no influence we don’t already have, acquires us no property and is not even particularly beautiful. There’s nothing to be gained from her. The others are fine.”

“Nymeria Sand, the bastard, is fine?”

“The daughter of Oberyn Martell, yes, she’ll do. Especially at this delicate time with Dorne. In truth, I think she’s a better choice than Arianne Martell. I have a feeling Doran would have changed his heir if you’d married her. Never mind that Nymeria brings no property, she brings the ear of her father. That’s more important.”

“Brienne Tarth?”

“Ancient family, nice estate near the capital. Healthy girl, young. I have no problem with her.”

“She’s not very ladylike.” Jaime tried to get his head around Tywin’s sudden magnanimous nature.

“Your sister is the best at diplomatic work. Your brother at negotiation. All you and your wife need to do is make more Lannisters. I trust you wouldn’t choose someone with whom you’re not willing to do that duty.”

Jaime felt shortchanged and slighted even if his was undoubtedly an enviable position. “You think that’s all I’m good for?”

“It’s the most important job!” Tywin thundered. “Do you think I worked my entire life to see our lands go to the spawn of my spineless brother? Of course, there is a great deal of management work to be done to keep up the estate. I assure you, you and your wife will be busy with more than diapers once you come into your inheritance.”

Jaime knew he was being cozened, but it helped. Worse, he’d already planned to send Myranda home, before Tywin even spoke to him. She’d been highly amusing, and with her bawdy mind he dearly wanted to introduce her to Tyrion, but he wasn’t as emotionally attached to her as he was to the others.
At the ceremony the next day, Jaime rather got the idea that Myranda agreed. She took her
dismissal with a smile on her lips, and stole kisses from both him and Varys on the way out.

Week 3 (Double Elimination)
Remaining: Brienne, Sansa, Margaery, Arianne, Nymeria, Myranda, and Roslin

Varys’ silk-draped arm rested chummily on Jaime’s shoulder, “I have some exciting news for you,
Ser Jaime. Tomorrow, you will take each of our lovely ladies on a private outing of your choice.”
He turned to face the camera. “Or semi-private, since we’ll all come along. That’s seven dates in
one day! You’ll spend thirty minutes with each lady, get to know her a little better, and then…
make a decision! Because this week, there will be no elimination ceremony. You’ll have to make
the call if she stays or goes immediately after the date. Isn’t that thrilling? Perhaps if Ser Jaime is
in a hurry, he’ll finish the competition off for us in one evening.”

Jaime knew that was not really an option. The producers asked him to eliminate two, no more; no
less. And to try to put the ones he was on the bubble about closer to the end to keep the audience
guessing. And to keep at least one of Margaery Tyrell or Sansa Stark. He was starting to grow
weary of their interference. Anything was better than having his father choose, he reminded
himself.

The producers did not understand why he insisted on beginning with Brienne. Perhaps they
suspected he wanted to get an elimination out of the way early. For Jaime, however, speaking with
her would be his only opportunity to gather information about who should be eliminated before the
rest of the dates.

First, of course, he had to think of something to do with her for thirty minutes. The cameras would
be recording all of it, so there was no point in trying to slip in the conversation he needed. None of
the suggested dates seemed like they would suit her personality. However, he’d seen something on
the hotel’s grounds…

The film crew hastily set up their equipment around the court outside. A bemused Brienne
emerged from the hotel’s back exit to find her bachelor waiting for her dressed in a basketball
jersey and baggy shorts.

Jaime nearly choked on his own tongue. A sports bra and bicycle shorts seemed to be the best
athletic wear that Olyvar could find for Brienne on short notice.

“They told me to have a one-on-one date with you. I may have misunderstood,” he said once he
could speak again.

“Oh, I’m always up for some one-on-one,” she responded. The toned muscles in her abdomen and
thighs became taut as she took her stance.

No one except Jaime (certainly not Olyvar who could rattle off dozens of sportswear stores nearby)
was surprised to find him down by four points in short order. He realized that he had to change
tactics if he was going to overcome the distracting circumstances.
Brienne’s mouth dropped open. She could not believe Jaime had just body-checked her underneath the hoop. “Flagrant foul!” she protested.

“Take your free throw, then,” he said, tossing her the ball he’d stolen. “Fouls are part of the game.”

A slow smile of comprehension dawned as she realized they were going to take the gloves off. She sank the shot and went back to playing defense, ready to charge.

The moment when it became clear that she wasn’t going to let him win to flatter his ego was the moment that Brienne became an underdog favorite with much of the audience. ‘A woman like her is exactly what that spoiled rich boy needs,’ being the general sentiment. Perhaps she wouldn’t have played so boldly if she thought she had a chance in the competition, but there’s a certain freedom in thinking you’ve already failed.

After an unnecessarily rough game – Brienne won 21 to 19, but they both would have fouled out in a regulation game – the producers called time. The date only lasted about twenty minutes, but they wanted to give Jaime plenty of opportunity to shower and groom before the next one.

“So Ser Jaime, will Miss Tarth be returning next week?” Varys asked, looking entirely out of place on the basketball court.

Brienne’s blue eyes found Jaime. She hadn’t known there was anything at stake this afternoon.

“Of course! I demand a rematch!” Jaime yelled and chucked the ball at her head. She caught it, clutched it to her chest, and smiled, her shyness returning.

“There you have it,” Varys said. “One down, six to go.”

“Hey there! Brienne! Wench!”

At last she turned, her attention recalled from the fantasies dancing through her head by the derogatory nickname.

“Wait up, we need to talk. Let’s head to the showers.”

“Excuse me?” she asked. In truth, she wasn’t upset at him, precisely. The intense competition had gotten her blood up, and her mind was wandering to places she’d previously forbidden it to go. That didn’t mean she was prepared to jump in the shower with him, though, or even discuss it. Not with all these cameras around. Her father would see this!

“Showers, plural,” he said, taking in her apprehensive expression. “But first we need to talk.” Once they walked further down the corridor, he pressed her against the wall, knowing that it would be edited to look like they were making out. The cameras wouldn’t approach any closer to the shower area though, and the mics are well away; this would be their best chance to speak.

“Like you saw, I have to make the call right after each date today. I need to axe two contestants. Do you have anything for me?”

Brienne had to shake her head to clear it. His closeness and his musk were unbelievably distracting.

“Nothing?” he asked dismayed.

“Oh, uh, yes. I do. R-Roslin Frey never got over Robb Stark leaving her at the altar. She just wants
someone from a high house. She doesn’t care who it is. Her only goal is to end up better off than
the girl he married. And Arianne Martell is worried that her father will change his heir to her
younger brother since she mucked up an investment with the family business. She wants the safety
net of being part of another wealthy family in case that comes to pass.”

“Thank you,” he said. His lips brushed against hers. He meant for it to be a stage kiss, mostly for
show, but she surprised him by kissing back. Nothing could stop him from surging forward, not
even his conscience screaming at him not to lead her on. I’m not, he thought as her hands splayed
at her sides, gripping the wall for support when her knees buckled. I swear I’m not, he thought as
he ran his hands down her flanks to cup her hips. How very little separated them from merging was
a fact his id made emphatic note of.

“Ser Jaime, hurry back on set. We need to prep the next location,” a shout came from around the
corner.

Brienne pulled back and blinked as if she couldn’t believe what just happened. She felt guilty and
wanted to apologize; Jaime could see it in her face. He spoke first. “To be continued,” he said. He
gave her a roguish grin and dashed toward the showers and the rest of his long evening.

He and Margaery attended a private show at a local art gallery. Her comprehensive and enthusiastic
responses to the pieces left him feeling uncultured. Him, the future Lord Lannister! His family had
bought more art than they knew what to do with… literally, with much of it stored away in the
family vaults. Margaery proved to be an excellent conversationalist, wealthy, and beautiful.
Brienne had nothing to say against her so, even though Jaime suspected she was Tywin’s top choice
for him, she stayed.

He took Roslin Frey fishing, thinking it would give them an opportunity to talk. He found this was
a mistake for two reasons. First, because it took almost no provocation to have her railing against
Jeyne Westerling-Stark for the rest of the date. Such an unhealthy obsession with a former
romantic rival could not bode well. Robb had behaved poorly, to be sure, but Roslin should not
have proclaimed herself ready for marriage with the wounds of her last relationship still so fresh in
her heart. Secondly, she actually liked fishing. Gods, what a boring, slimy, dismal activity. Jaime
counted himself lucky for Brienne’s warning and sent her away.

Nymeria Sand and Myranda Royce were two easy advancements for next week since Brienne had
nothing relevant to say about either. He and Nymeria attended a wine tasting. She subtly
complained about everything that wasn’t Dornish. Jaime began to understand why Brienne clearly
didn’t like her but couldn’t find anything concrete to mention. He brought Myranda to a dessert bar,
knowing better than to take her anywhere near unlimited liquor. She had the self-control of his
brother, which is to say, none. Instead, they ate their way through a scandalous amount of
chocolate.

Jaime knew he had to have his wits about him with Sansa Stark. Not only was the woman clever
and well schooled in politics, but he did not have reliable inside information about her from
Brienne. The big lummox did nothing but sing her praises and try to build the case that Miss Stark
would be his ideal wife. To him she seemed lackluster so far, however, some women were most
effective one-on-one. He found the perfect date for them: volunteering at the animal shelter. As
soon as she saw the puppies, she came to life. The eyes he would have described as flat and grey
before suddenly sparked. Her smile showed her teeth, and she had no qualms about getting
covered with dirty paw prints. She laughed so merrily at seeing him bottle-feeding a baby goat that
he could see a future with her as being a pleasant journey indeed. The lummox was right again;
Sansa stays.

Jaime had saved Arianne for last knowing that she would need to go if Sansa did not. They took a long walk on the beach, giving them plenty of opportunity for conversation. For the first time, he could not confirm something Brienne had said. Arianne skillfully dodged his important questions. Of course, she was still Doran’s heir… but she’d been hoping they could live at Casterly Rock. She heard so many wonderful stories about its history. Of course she had plenty of money… but isn’t it nice that with the Lannister fortune, their children will never want for anything. In the end, he decided that he trusted Brienne more than the Dornish princess and sent Arianne on her way home.
Chapter Notes

At first the scenes are in backwards order, then after the divider we bounce back in time and switch to forwards. So it goes: 5-4 // 1-2-3

**Week 4 (Revelations)**

**Remaining:** Brienne, Sansa, Nymeria, Margaery, and Myranda

The studio audience murmured in confusion when Sansa Stark asked to speak before Ser Jaime began to award his tokens of faith. At first they thought she was being overly dramatic. True, her time with Jaime hadn’t been his most… provocative date of the evening, but she should definitely still be in the running. He gestured like a true gentleman to encourage her to say her piece.

“Ser Jaime, I’ve enjoyed my time here so very much. I’ve made many new friendships that I hope will last my lifetime, including yourself, Ser. You’ve shown me a truly noble spirit and inspired me to strive for the best in myself. That is why, with a heavy heart, I must ask your leave to depart. I have decided to forge my chain at the Citadel.”

The astonished gasp of the audience could be heard without any audio manipulation. Cameras swept over the faces of the other contestants who had been told to act surprised. Some pulled it off better than others. Brienne, in particular, stood there so expressionless that Myranda spontaneously decided to pull her into a hug to help her cover.

“Of course, Sansa, if that’s what you truly want.” Jaime looked into Sansa’s eyes, his heartfelt grief showing.

“It is, Ser. May the gods guide and watch over you.” She turned to her fellow contestants. “May the gods watch over all of you.”

The tears in Sansa’s eyes as she was led backstage were mainly of gratitude and relief, but there was some true regret as well. Ser Jaime had proven himself to be a far better man than her father had told her to expect. She found herself hoping that the gods allowed him to find a wife deserving of his kindness, which is not what his reputation would have led her to think.

Jaime waited in the hot tub, flutes of champagne already poured, for his final date to arrive. He didn’t really want to go through with this charade, but he would have to if they were going to sell it. Worse, she would have to, and acting skills were not among the woman’s many fine qualities.

Brienne arrived for their date wearing a black bathing suit and a scowl which she was trying to make look like a smile. Jaime felt his cock twitch, as per usual whenever he took in her body. His first thought was to blame wardrobe for his reaction, but all the girls wore basically identical one-piece swimsuits. It wasn’t wardrobe’s fault that only her toned biceps and well-defined calves made him stand to attention. He tried desperately to keep his mind on the matter at hand. The cameras were rolling.
Brienne stepped into the hot tub and immediately huddled over to hide as much of her body as possible.

_Oh, A+ job, wench. Really making this look genuine. “Is something the matter?”_

She shook her head. Mulish. Also angry, if Jaime didn’t miss his guess.

He turned to the film crew. “Listen, can you take five? She’s modest. You got a shot of her entering the tub. Let her loosen up a bit,” he gestured at the champagne, “then we’ll finish this.” Always eager to film drunken contestants, the crew backed away. Jaime checked to make sure all the red lights were off on the cameras before he drew closer.

“How have they spoken to you about Sansa yet?” Brienne asked.

“Yes, they have. She and I already talked. We decided that the best way to proceed will be for her to drop out before I can present any stars. She’ll say she wants to leave to further her education. She may not end up forging an entire chain, but a link or two would do anyone some good. That way her privacy is preserved and nothing that could damage her reputation has to come out.”

“It’s so unfair,” Brienne said, her eyes filling with tears.

“I know. I agree.”

“She would have been the perfect wife for you.”

“A lot of people certainly seem to think so.” Sansa had reportedly been in the lead according to the bookkeepers. Jaime’s internal opinion was not factored into those numbers. He’d place her not higher than second, and quite possibly – he reached a hand to stroke a tear from Brienne’s cheek – third.

“How can you be so kind and do such horrible things?”

“Beg pardon?”

“Nymeria told me… she told me everything.”

“Oh.” Jaime stepped back to give her space. “I suppose you’d want to go if I didn’t have to send Sansa this week.”

“I don’t know! I should, but I don’t.” The filming crew returned and, seeing the bachelor and the contestant in a heated conversation, quickly resumed their posts.

“We don’t have to talk about this now. We should keep our focus on today,” Jaime tried to change the course of the conversation, but he could tell she was barely listening.

“I’m confused, and I think maybe you’re confused too. That’s what I’ve been telling myself ever since I found out. You seem lost, and maybe you just need a guide. So I’m here. If you want me, if you want a way out. I’m here.”

She mouthed something that looked suspiciously like ‘I love you.’ Her lip was quivering too much to be sure, though.

Jaime couldn’t stand to look into her pure, yearning eyes. He held open his arms, and Brienne allowed herself to be enfolded. He held her tightly against his chest, letting her cry. Her rhythmic sobs, when slowed and put to a different soundtrack by editing seemed more like moans. From the
audience’s perspective, they came very close to intercourse in that tub, a fact that would piss Brienne off to no end later when she considered the actual surrounding circumstances.

“He’s falling for her, he’s just not entirely conscious of it yet,” Olyvar said. He and his friend Pod were having their customary breakfast and scheming session. Pod had damn near worshiped one of the contestants since the second week of filming and co-opted Olyvar to help advance her case. Olyvar thought it hopeless at first, but soon changed his tune when he observed their chemistry.

“I hope you’re right. She’s the kindest noble woman I’ve ever met. So pure of heart and strong. She doesn’t let herself get run over by his quick mouth. It’s just… the other women are a lot more, uh, woman-y,” Pod said.

“Don’t kid yourself; it’s physical, too. He can’t control himself whenever he sees her body, I’m telling you,” Olyvar insisted.

“Maybe, but what more can we do? It’s not like you can send them on a date naked,” Pod replied.

Olyvar’s eyes twinkled. “Have you ever heard of a little thing called fan service? Just back me up.”

Olyvar knocked on Lord Baelish’s office door. This senior producer was an early bird, he knew, always up at dawn prospecting for ways to squeeze more profit from the show. “Enter,” he said.

“Lord Baelish, I was just talking to Pod here and he had an excellent suggestion for the show this week.”

Petyr Baelish looked up from his papers, taking in the startled young man standing next to his wardrobe supervisor. He didn’t look particularly bright, but *Westerosi Bachelor* wasn't exactly brain food. “Let’s hear it, then,” Baelish said pleasantly.

“He told me that, speaking for young straight guys, it’d be nice to see more of the ladies, if you catch my drift. So I thought, how about instead of candlelight and cocktails, we turn it into hot tub and champagne? We put them all in bathing suits. Glamour shots of them walking to the tub. Steam. Flushed faces. I mean, we’re down to five here; we have to stretch things out a little.”

“Ser Jaime too. I mean, lots of the audience want to see what he looks like underneath his formal wear,” Pod added.

“A fine point, a very fine point, Pod. Demographics puts our audience at over half female,” Olyvar said, surprised. Pod had a pretty sharp mind under that rat’s nest of hair and thick brow.

“Hmm. How quickly can you fit the bathing suits?” Baelish asked.

“Blink of an eye, my lord. And if they’re a little tight, well…”

“Very good. I think we’re on the same page.”

Margaery and Sansa laughed together over their morning pancakes. Margaery had such a beautiful
smile. If she’d smile like that around Jaime more often, this competition would already be over, in Brienne's opinion. Brienne knew her own smile did little for her face except show her crooked teeth. A wave of guilt coursed through her. She’d gotten carried away last week, kissing Jaime and letting herself imagine that she felt passion in his response.

Brienne walked over to stand before a full-length mirror. Ugly. Still ugly. Coarse features, freckles everywhere, no breasts to speak of. There was no possible way he could consider her as a real contender. The mirror never lies. She’d tell him tonight that all the rest were for real, so it was time to send her home. A deal was a deal. She’d made it more than halfway. Far exceeded expectations. Crying was not allowed.

Lord Baelish burst into the women’s ready room without knocking. They were all dressed, but gods, he’d never done that before. His eyes scanned the room until she found Sansa.

“Miss Stark, please choose a friend and come with me immediately,” he said. There were strict rules about any of the contestants being alone with any member of the production staff for reasons of propriety. Even Lord Baelish didn’t feel he was able to ignore them.

Sansa gravitated toward her staunchest defender and grabbed Brienne’s hand. The two women followed Lord Baelish to a meeting room where the on-staff physician waited.

“Dr. Pycelle has some private medical information to share. Miss Tarth can stay with you or she can wait outside. Your choice,” said Lord Baelish.

“She can stay. I want her here.” As Lord Baelish departed, Sansa turned worried eyes to the doctor. “Is something wrong with me?”

“Well my dear,” Dr. Pycelle said, “you don’t seem to have had a menstrual cycle since you arrived. Is your period irregular?”

“Sometimes,” Sansa muttered.

“According to your blood work, you’re not pregnant. Therefore, I checked your medical files. Do you know what I found?”

“The assault,” Sansa whispered.

“That is sealed!” Brienne was on her feet. Remembering that day made her sick. She knew there was nothing she could have done; nothing either of them could have done. Ramsay had lain in wait. Made sure Sansa was alone. Delivered three stabs wounds to the abdomen for no reason. He was a monster and there was no hell too deep for him.

“The waivers you signed gives us access to all medical records, even private ones. The incident is relevant. It was a violent assault that potentially impacted your ability to bear children.”

“Potentially! Nothing’s proven,” Brienne objected. “It’s not like we live in the Middle Ages. There are treatments or even surrogacy-”


“I’m sorry, but fertility is an absolute requirement. You’ve been here over a month and haven’t had a complete menstrual cycle. I’m afraid this disqualifies you. We will meet with Ser Jaime and see how he wants to handle it.”

Brienne supported Sansa as they walked out of the office and back towards their rooms. Though
she kept a tight hold on Brienne’s arm, Sansa bowed her head and said nothing. Her future was out of her hands now. If Ser Jaime wanted, he could drop hints about the assault to a national audience; let everyone know she was damaged, possibly barren. She would speak with him tonight during whatever pointless date the producers had dreamed up and learn what sort of man he truly is.

The news spread quickly through the grapevine even though, for the life of her, Brienne couldn’t figure out who leaked it. Her production assistant buddy, Podrick, suspected Dr. Pycelle’s secretary. What difference did it really make? She’d known this show was crass; she hadn’t realized it was also cruel. She should quit, Brienne decided. Thinking on it further, she realized she could probably convince Margaery to come along. Myranda, too. If they all quit, the producers would have to take Sansa back to save the show.

Brienne smiled at Nymeria. She’d be the toughest nut to crack. Brienne tended to avoid her as much as possible because her skillful twisting of language always left Brienne feeling like the was knitting a noose for herself. She had to try, though. This needed to be unanimous.

“I suppose you heard firsthand, eh? Poor Sansa can’t have babies, as I’m sure she well knew before she came here. Counting on her family name to see her past the rules,” Nymeria said.

Brienne’s heart sank; that wasn’t a promising start. “She knows no such thing. They just don’t have time to run the tests. Once they do, they’ll see how wrong they were.”

Nymeria tried to look down her nose at Brienne, but mechanically had to look up. “Well, it means another week for the rest of us anyway. Next week it will be you, me, Margaery and Myranda. I understand Margaery and myself, but what do you and Myranda bring to the table, hmm? You in particular. What have you been doing to the man that he puts up with your scowling face week after week?”

“None of your business,” Brienne said as she tried to disengage from the fruitless conversation.

Nymeria touched Brienne’s arm to stop her. “It is though. You are, strangely, starting to feel like my biggest competition now. I thought it would be Sansa. How could Ser Jaime resist being lord of Winterfell and Casterly Rock? We see that wasn’t meant to be. I think we both know Margaery’s heart is not going to be in it with Sansa gone. Myranda is just a big pair of tits; he’ll see past that eventually. What is it with you?”

Brienne shook her off, the stress of the day causing her temper to break. “Well, what is it with you? You’re a no-name bastard with an unpleasant personality. Why is he keeping you around?”

A viper’s grin took over Nymeria’s face as Brienne stepped into her trap. In fact, she believed scaring off this simpleton would be no trouble at all; it was a bonus that she could use the truth. “That is an interesting question, isn’t it? Perhaps you’d like to know more about our handsome gentleman and his family. The overbearing father whose approval he desperately craves. The younger brother he tries to vain to protect. The twin sister he fucks.”

“You’re not just a liar but an insane one if you expect me to believe that.”

“Oh, I assure you it’s true. You see, I’m her.” Nymeria gestured down her form.

“Oh obviously not. You look nothing like the Lannisters,” Brienne scoffed.

“Don’t be so literal-minded. What I mean is, I have an arrangement with them. You see, my paramour is a Dayne, one of our most storied noble houses. His father says he must marry a noble
lady, not a Sand. Cersei Lannister, would be an excellent catch, old as she is. So, Ser Jaime marries me; his sister marries my lover. We all live together at Sunspear and enjoy whatever combinations we please.”

Brienne shook her head in flat denial. “He would never… bed his sister. It’s obscene. He’s a decent man.”

“Think what you want, but prepare yourself for a Dornish double wedding when this show concludes. He knows that union with me means his sister, his other half. He’s been under her spell since they were no more than children. He’s never put anyone else before her. He never will.”

“We’ll see,” Brienne said. She strode away from Nymeria, fighting a sudden wave of nausea.

It didn’t feel like a lie; hells, it felt like the truest thing Nymeria had said yet. Jaime must be in on it too for Nymeria to have made it so far. Brienne realized that if she pulled out of the competition now, their sick plan would surely succeed. Of course, the choice was entirely Jaime's so there was little hope of keeping the scheme from coming to pass. Unless... perhaps the conclusion wasn't as foregone as Nymeria thought.

Sansa, Brienne decided. That will be the test. If he treats Sansa well despite there being no gain for himself, then he will have shown a core of decency. On the other hand, if he chooses to humiliate her and his family’s old enemies, the Starks, then she’ll know he is truly nothing but vile inside and can leave him to his own destruction.

Brienne couldn't help but think back over the time she spent with Jaime in the past month. *I can't be that foolish, can I? To have imagined all the fond glances and tender touches. The kiss certainly felt real.*

Praying that she wasn't deluding herself, Brienne started to make her own plans. Assuming Jaime didn't break her heart tonight, she would find a way to set him free from his unnatural alliance. Whether it was by Margaery or Myranda (or herself? a whisper said from inside, trying to ignore the mirror). Whatever it took. She'd make sure one of them saved him from himself.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Order of the five scenes: 3-1-4-2-5. So the last scene is actually last for a change. Whoa.

***3***

Jaime Lannister’s season of *Westerosi Bachelor* delivered impressive ratings for the network. Buzz about the couple continued to build throughout their six-month courtship leading up to the wedding. Only rarely did network-arranged marriages go all the way through to a wedding, so the producers planned to milk it for all it was worth. The original contract signed by Jaime and each contestant stipulated that the network would have the right to film at whatever locale the couple designated if a wedding occurred. Naturally, nothing would do for the scion of the Lannister family than the Great Sept of Baelor in King’s Landing.

On the day of the wedding, everything was in perfect order in the sept. The High Septon himself stood at the altar before the gods, ready to officiate. The audience waited for Brienne and Jaime to enter from opposite wings and meet at the altar. Minutes ticked by, and the couple went from being fashionably late to concerningly tardy.

Cersei volunteered to check the bride-to-be’s chambers to discover the cause of the delay. A camera crew followed along, but she didn’t mind. She was perfectly capable of acting the part of the genuine, loving goodsister to this cow. She hadn’t spoken much with either her or Jaime since the deal she’d arranged with Nymeria Sand had fallen through. That was his choice (and his loss). Gradually, though, she’d been nibbling through the defensive wall Brienne erected. Once she had Brienne’s trust, she could worm her way back into Jaime’s life.

The girl was too nice; that was her fatal flaw. She would grab onto any olive branch Cersei extended to bring peace to the family. Father, in his ignorance of the circumstances, insisted Cersei be invited to the wedding. Cersei generously sent a world-famous designer to meet with Brienne and custom-make her dress. Hilariously, Cersei found she didn’t even need to meddle. The unfortunate girl looked like a sow in silk no matter what he tried, and she had no taste as well. Every alteration she requested made matters worse.

Cersei knocked on the door. “Brienne, are you decent?”

When there was no reply, she told the camera crew to pause for a moment while she entered the room to spy out the situation. She was not entirely surprised to find the dress on the floor of the empty room, a heap of silk and lace. She waved the cameras in and walked over to the room’s other closed door.

Cersei knocked on the door to the bathroom. “Brienne, dear, you really must come out and get dressed. We have over five hundred guests waiting, not to mention the millions who will watch in prime time.” *Giving the bashful thing a little stage fright couldn’t hurt. Oh this was such fun!*

There was no response, not even a sob, so she knocked again. Then, she tried the knob. It turned easily to reveal a darkened, empty room.
“She’s gone,” Cersei said with a puzzled frown. In the long run, certainly, the girl fleeing was good. But really, she was leaving Jaime at the altar. It was a world gone mad.

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Brienne looked at herself in the mirror and tried not to cry. For one thing, she was terrible at crying, so unpracticed that she tended to lose control completely. It caused her face to transcend its usual level of ugliness to achieve something almost monstrous. Her skin would flush and blotch, taking hours to settle down. Also, the makeup artists had already done what they could to help her, lining her eyes and carefully applying ‘natural’ shades to her eyelids, cheeks, and lips. They’d wanted to cover all her freckles with a thick foundation solution but there she’d refused them. There was no point in trying to hide her freckles; wherever the makeup stopped, the spots would stand out all the more.

She slowly turned to take in the wedding dress, a gift from her future goodsister. It was unquestionably stunning, costing as much as a new car. Hand-tailored over three separate fittings with strategic padding and pleats, it should have been perfect. Yet, all Brienne could see were her freckles peeking out underneath the lace, her broad-shouldered build that couldn’t be hidden, and of course, her tragically homely face. *Maybe with the veil,* she thought.

Brienne upbraided herself; she was being vain and selfish. What sensible woman would be resentful about a deluxe, society wedding to the man of her dreams? For almost anyone, today would be beyond their wildest fantasies. She was just being ungrateful, plain and simple. Besides, people tended to treat the bride nicely. No one would make oinking noises at her as she walked to the altar. She was almost 100% sure.

Someone knocked at the door.

****4****

The film crews gathered in the sept were starting to sense that they may earn some overtime on this job. They had seen Ser Jaime walking about earlier, but so far, no bride. Brienne hadn’t seemed at all a diva during the show, but she was taking her sweet time today. The mobile unit followed Varys around as he killed time interviewing some members of the audience.

Nymeria Sand, the runner up, sat with a forced smile on her lips and her teeth firmly gritted. Her attendance at the wedding had been obligatory. She would have seemed a sore loser if she hadn’t come, and her parents always emphasized the importance of keeping up appearances. All she had to do was spit out some phrases about being happy for the couple and wishing them well. No one expected her to mean it. Still, considering the degree of loss – for herself, her paramour, and Cersei – Jaime’s stupid decision has caused, feigning any type of positivity was nearly impossible.

“Do you have any words for the happy couple?” Varys asked.

“May your marriage always be interesting,” she said, trying to make it sound like a blessing and fooling no one.

Several other former contestants were scattered around the audience. Most had already found someone new, and did not seem overly jealous of Brienne for securing her ‘prize.’ Walda Frey, already pregnant with husband Roose Bolton’s child certainly bore no grudge. Nor did Dacey Mormont, who was rumored to be dating nobility of a sort, the governor of the unincorporated northlings, Mance Rayder. Roslin Frey was the only one who seemed to be struggling to rein in her
temper. Her own date, a quite respectable Ed Tully, felt neglected due to all the daggers she stared at Meera Reed and her fiancé, Bran Stark.

Missendei was escorted by a tall, handsome man whom the crew recognized as a former bodyguard for the ladies. She introduced him as Grey, a gentleman scholar. Though there was no denying the muscular build underneath his suit, she said he’d first gotten her attention by addressing her in her native tongue. Clearly, the Jaime and Brienne romance wasn’t the only one to blossom while the show filmed.

Jaime had eventually yielded to his mischievous impulses and arranged an introduction between Tyrion and Myranda Royce. They had both been barely coherent messes ever since. He knew it was a bad idea, but they seemed to be having fun and surely it would burn itself out soon. Most likely Arianne Martell would be thrown at him afterwards, speculating from some hints Tywin had dropped. He and Doran Martell sat next to each other in the sept, surely scheming something of the sort.

“Oh no!” Tyrion suddenly called out. “The room is spinning!” He stood in the aisle and started to gesture wildly about. Myranda stumbled out to assist him, tripping over the hem of her dress. She landed in Lord Baelish’s lap, tangling him in layers of satin. Others surged into the aisle to tend to Tyrion who was moaning and gagging piteously. Tyrion had finally managed to upstage his older brother in the most dramatic way possible.

***2***

Jaime looked good, if he did say so himself. Exquisite new tuxedo, stylistic haircut, even tasteful makeup – purely for the cameras, of course. Tyrion, his best man, weaved his way to Jaime’s station in the wings of the sept.

“Are you sure you’re sober enough to handle this?” Jaime asked.

“Of course, brother mine. I’ve only had a nip or two to keep the nerves at bay. A couple more to stay in character. Maybe a smidge just for pleasure.”

“You’ve talked to Sansa?”

“Yes, it’s as you suspected. She’s miserable.”

“So we’re a go for the contingencies? The captain has been appraised?”

“All arranged.”

“And you’re sure you don’t mind taking one for the team here?”

“Y’know, as it turns out, those last four or five nips might have made running a bit complicated. It’s probably best if I stay and serve as the distraction.”

“Alright. Give me the ring, wait ten minutes, then do your job; I’ll get the last piece of the plan now.”

Brienne was feeling strangely deserted. Sansa had stepped out, saying she’d be right back but never returned. The hair and makeup people finished ages ago. She was all alone. Perhaps this was their way of encouraging her to go downstairs. Surely her father was already waiting for her, ready to give his reassurance. Probably that was him knocking now, knowing her well enough to sense that her absence meant she was becoming paralyzed.
Brienne answered the door and recoiled in shock at seeing Jaime there. “Jaime! You’re not supposed to be here!” She tried to find some way to hide her giant, silk-clad form.

“Well, you’re supposed to be downstairs ready to claim your man. The Septon’s starting to mutter proverbs on patience.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, shame pinning her eyes to her feet.

“You’re also supposed to be happy,” Jaime said tenderly, lifting up her chin. “We’ve been together six months now. I know you love me.”

“I do! I do. I’m just being silly. I can get through this. Go back down, and I’ll-”

“It’s our wedding day, Brienne. I’d like you to do more than get through it.”

Brienne’s temper flared. “I can’t help how I am. I’ll never be comfortable with this sort of spectacle. I will do it for you, though.”

“Do you think this is my idea of a good time?”

“Well, no. But we made a commitment. We must carry it through.”

Jaime shook his head fondly. “Oh, I wouldn’t dream of asking you to renege on your promises to the network. We’re just going to meet them a different way. Do you trust me?”

“Yes. Obviously. We’d not have gotten this far if I didn’t.”

“Good. First get out of that hideous dress. Then, follow me.” He walked across the room and slid the window open. Olyvar climbed in carrying a garment bag.

Olyvar tutted. “Honestly. Why do you keep trying to hide those legs?”

“Hurry and get changed. I’ll make sure everyone else is ready,” Jaime said. He hoisted himself over the windowsill and clattered down the fire escape.

Brienne supposed running down to the sept right now would be her last chance to avoid being caught up in one of Jaime’s baroque, lovably crazy schemes. “Unzip me?” she asked Olyvar.

*****5*****

The innocuous white van, driven by Pod, arrived at its destination ahead of schedule. Jaime had to admit that Brienne’s personal assistant knew the roads. The passengers climbed out, one of whom was highly bewildered.

“Jaime, why are we at the docks?” Brienne asked. Her new dress was less obviously a wedding dress. White and silk, yes, but also tight, sleeveless, and much shorter than most. She’d been around Jaime long enough now that she no longer felt so self-conscious about showing her body. His admiring glances at her shoulders (and lower) finally penetrated her denial that anyone could find her frame attractive.

A sharp whistle cut through the sea breeze. “Over here! C’mon, step lively. She’s a fast little ship, but she ain’t outrunning the coastguard if your goodfather gets wind of this.” Yara Greyjoy stood at the head of a gangplank, waving them over to a mid-sized yacht. “Let’s go; let’s go,” she clapped.

Brienne, Jaime, Olyvar, and Pod jogged onto the ship. Sansa, Margaery, and Selwyn Tarth already
waited on board. Sansa waved, breaking away from cuddling with Margaery to do so. Nothing had been announced yet, but recently Sansa had taken to wearing a rose-shaped promise ring on her left hand. Brienne tried to get her bearings while Yara hurriedly cast off.

“Jaime, what in the hells are we doing?”

“We’re getting married. Just with a much smaller ceremony than anticipated.”

“What about the guests?”

“Eh, we brought along the ones that matter most. Except for Tyrion, and he’d have been too drunk to remember anyway.”

“What will the network do?”

“Let the Lannister family lawyers handle that. Besides, they got plenty of footage at the sept. The missing couple will be very dramatic. Maybe we’ll reenact the escape for them once we get back from our honeymoon. The ratings will be astronomical.”

Margaery pointed to her phone. “No worries. I’ll video the whole ceremony, so they’ll have real footage to work with, too.”

Brienne looked around. “I don’t see a septon.”

“We’ve got a ship’s captain; she’ll do the honors.” Yara saluted them as she opened the throttle and headed them out to sea.

“Where, um, where will we go for our honeymoon? Not Dorne, I hope,” Brienne asked.

Jaime kissed her lightly on the lips. No one was making decisions for either of them, ever again. “Wherever we want, love. Wherever we want.”

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