May the Norns Bind Their Fate

by WackyGoofball

Summary

Brienne, daughter of Jarl Selwyn, finds herself at a point in her life where the home she sacrificed so much for seems in danger. Not only is she confronted with societal conventions running contrary to what the norns foretold, but also with a stranger coming to their small village North of the Vale:

The Kingslayer, Jaime Tywinson, a man whose dark reputation reaches into every corner of the continent.

While the man from Casterly Rock refuses to reveal his true intentions that led him to those stranger lands, it leaves the jarl with the tough decision of what to do with the Kingslayer now that he has invaded their territories, so not to bring Tywin Lannister up against them. After all, Selwyn does not wish for war, in contrast to most other jarls.

Thus, the norns bind the fate of the warrior and the shieldmaiden together in the most unexpected ways, wherein both have to realize that they have a lot more in common than meets the eye, as the two share in dark secrets from the past, painted in green flames.

However, just like the world is bound to repeat itself, those dark secrets may come back to
light in the future close by.

And so, the norms weave their destiny, for better or worse...

Notes

Hello everyone. Thanks for showing the courage to look into this story I want to tell.

I want to use the opportunity of the Author's Note to make some important distinctions, I believe: As I hinted at in the tags, I don't claim historical accuracy. As this story is set in Westeros, I give myself the leeway of geographies already (I found it easier to keep the geography instead of taking them all to real-life locations in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland etc.) and thus also take liberty in the customs and social structures, as some will lean more closely on the ASOIAF and GoT side than that of the actual Norse mythology and Viking customs and conventions.

Similarly, I do not have a Scandinavian studies background of any kind, neither am I of the region. Therefore, my "knowledge" is limited to random articles I read online, those sites in particular, which I have been largely drawing on for the lore and some information of what we can say about Viking customs, social structures, etc.

https://norse-mythology.org/
http://www.hurstwic.com/
https://www.historyonthenet.com/vikings-history-overview-culture-history-viking-age/

I also took further information from:

*The Love of Destiny: The Sacred and the Profane in Germanic Polytheism* (2013) by Dan McCoy and

So you see, I don't make claims to this being a very accurate depiction, or even midly, LOL. I will also admit that I was largely inspired by the History Channel's series *Vikings* (2013-), which is... *not* very historically accurate, haha. I just don't want to step on anyone's toes, really (which is always a great fear of mine when I do something in the historical fantasy department). Especially the part about the shieldmaidens is still something where there is ongoing debate as to how women took part in the battles (evidence was found that they did, but the question always is how customary it actually was and how the TV depiction of shieldmaidens very likely influenced our perception - also my perception - of them... you see where I am getting at with this, I hope).

Also also (seriously, that's one hell of a long Author's Note, but bear with me here)... As I got a lot of vibes from the TV show... and as this is GoT we are talking about, too... I am still debating with myself whether I want to take this fic all the way to explicit content in the... Southern regions. As it is well known, Wacky write no smut (safe for that one time, and that was a pure accident), because it is something I don't feel very strong about. At the same time, I guess it would kind of fit into the theme I am going for with this, so I guess it will depend a wee bit on the response I may get from you guys and hear your opinion on whether you would want that or not. I'd very much appreciate getting some opinions on the matter as I am genuinely unsure whether I want to go down that road. For now, I am keeping the M-Rating as we have some violence and strong language going on, but... maybe that's going to change.
We wil have to see.

Anyway... now to get back on track here (I feel like I am overexplaining things, but that is something I tend to do when I am really anxious about something): I still run around unbeta'd, I own nothing, I know nothing, and I am still no native.

I gift this work to three people who I hope are going to appreciate my Viking nonsense: NocturnalNordic, already for the sake of the name and deserving more love than I can express with this fic ;) , hardlyfatal who was already so kind to include me as part of the chosen circle to whom she gifted a work and expressed interest in such a story, and Renee561 who kept encouraging me to post it when I was still freaking out about it to the point that I was running circles in my room.

So yeah... I hope you are going to enjoy this story.

Much love! ♥♥♥
In the Beginning

The world is an endless repetition.

Ripe fruit, falling from the mighty Ash Tree *Yggdrasil* holding up the cosmos, the sky, eternity, to drop into the water of the wells residing by the world tree’s mighty roots, nourishing and poisoning the ash as bad blood keeps dripping back into the wells to feed a new cycle, a new war, a new life.

Beginning and ending.

The first and the last.

The world is quarrel.

The world is war.

Water and earth.

Fire and ice.
The same solemn song dripping from different tongues, travelling past different lips, but always with the same words, the same outcry for honor, shield, and axe, ready to strike, ready to earn one’s place within the great halls of our ancestors, of our Gods, the Father to us all.

The world is an endless repetition, an endless fight.

The Twilight of the Gods.

*Ragnarök.*

The final clash of forces beyond any worldly measure.

The end anticipated, prayed for, fought for, died for.

*Until…*

Until everything starts anew, begins to bloom as the sun rises behind green mounts, above white clouds and gray mist hanging over the still waters of the fjords.

And thick grass covers the world.

And rye sways in the winds coming from the North, howling, whistling, whispering the tales of old and new alike.

Until the world is nourished back to bloom, hungrily drinks the milk pouring out of the cosmos to make it strong again, like the babe suckles on the mother’s breast, fed by a power that perhaps not even a battle axe can wield – *love*.

And then, life shall begin again, for it is this struggle, to come back from whence we came, return to the beginning of life itself, to be nourished, held close to drink that first milk, consume that life and live it, which makes the peace that stands at the beginning of a new cycle worth dying for.

Over and over again.

This is the song of the world.

The Song of Ice and Fire.

Brienne loves the smell of grass in the morning, when the dew is not yet dried on the green blades, and the pearls of water bring even the strongest grass stalk to bow under its weight.

Because most people will underestimate the water’s power that doesn’t burn like fire, but is no less threatening, no less lethal, no less powerful, to make even the earth bow to its feet residing on the tip of the blades of grass at the top of a small mount, in a village almost entirely unheard of.

And Brienne feels joy rise in her chest to witness that every day anew, to remind herself of the place now her home, the tranquility, the peace within that seemingly won’t ever reach beyond their borders.

*It never did.*

So long she has those moments of private peace, Brienne can well live with the daily duties that
come with being the only living daughter to her father, when she would rather be down by the beach to practice with shield and axe.

However, Brienne rather keeps those secret joys to herself as she carries water from the well back to her home to water the animals, stomping through soft soil, which squelches beneath her leather boots, feeling the heavy grass brush against the exposed skin of her calves.

Life has been more of a hardship as of late. The last Winter, while short, was harsh and unforgiving to soil and plants, whereas the Spring was too mild. Many farmers struggled growing much of anything despite the fact that her clan has its village set at a place where the ground is fertile, more fertile than in many other regions across the continent. However, they still hold more than most other clans did or ever will. Her father always says that they are as strong as an ash tree because they learned to grow the backbone of nourishment, the root of the tree holding their world, instead of only counting on a strong arm to wield the axe or hold the shield.

Most jarls rely too much on raids these days to keep in power over the karls and thralls, ignoring the treasures they have resting in their soils, could grow for themselves instead of chasing fame on the battlefield alone, in favor of the shining treasures they see glistening at the distance, in stranger villages, stranger lands across the sea.

While of course, many rely on raids and trade foremost, some tend to forget that having good, fertile ground, growing crops to feed the young, the old, the men, women, and children, is about as important as is to fight and earn one’s place in the Great Halls of Valhalla.

The fact that they have such good and fertile grounds is what makes other jarls within their closer periphery want their village ever the more these days. This is true especially during times such as these, Brienne knows, in times of hunger and absence, even though, back in the days, they let them have this land because no one else would even bother to take it.

How the seasons change…

And that is why Brienne prepares, spends every free moment she has to spare to train, to be able to defend her people, her family, her father’s new lands upon which he succeeded in growing a new ash tree, strong and beautiful, meant to last for many generations, for more generations than the one they had to see burn back in the day.

They have to be ready. They have to be prepared, swords raised, shields aligned to fend off whatever enemy may dare come to their shores, may dare to trespass their borders.

Because we must never again be defenseless. That mustn’t repeat itself, not so long I still have might in my body to prevent it.

Brienne reaches the wooden fence encircling their stables at last. She’d want to wipe off the beads of sweat on her brow, but can’t thanks to the heavy buckets she carries. The young, blonde woman enters, pushing the gate open with her hip. She is instantly greeted by sheep, goats, and pigs roaming around her under squealing and grunting, waiting for their drink.

She stomps through the mud, over to the wooden water trough set at the far end. Brienne sighs as she puts one bucket down to take hold of the other to pour into the trough. After emptying out the second bucket as well, the mannish woman steps back to watch the animals gather about it to drink almost gleefully.

And sometimes Brienne wonders, if only to herself, how it is possible that the animals can be at peace when it comes to sharing this resource while the humans fail to stay at peace when there is
Brienne had a dream, she had many dreams, about how strong an army they could be, if only they fought together, about how much of a great wave they could form on the sea, a wave that could crush a hundred ships, if not more, and spread fertile ground all around them for all to have enough to eat.

A wave that would crush even the ships that used to crush her world years ago.

Brienne shakes her head as she leaves the animals to their water and short-lived peace, and instead gathers the eggs from the hens to carry back to their house. She puts them in the basket filled with straw set on the bench by the entrance, before sitting down next to the basket to pull off her muddy boots, which come off only under much effort.

She slips into the lighter, shorter boots made of buckskin Brienne normally wears around the house and town, so not to ruin the good leather with mud, grabs the basket, and makes her way inside.

Her father is still fast asleep, snoring loudly, as always. Though that only ever brings a small smile to Brienne’s lips as those are the kind of peaceful hours she learned to relish after they came to stay here, built their longhouses, built their new homes.

Brienne sees about the fire in the hearth and starts to prepare the day meal after briefly plunging her hands into the water basin by the window to wash off the dirt. Once that is done, she grabs a bowl from the windowsill to remove the cloth she put on top to reveal the scoops of dough she left there to sit for a while. Brienne pours some rye flower over her palms before starting to flatten out the balls of dough she prepped up before she went off to get the water for the animals. One for one fill the flat pan, and once all scoops are formed, Brienne carries it over to the hearth to roast them over the open, cracking fire.

That smell is about as good as that of fresh grass in the morning, at least in Brienne’s opinion.

Once all is done, the young woman sets up the bowls carved out of driftwood back from where they once came from, the few memorabilia they dare to hold on to in their new home, so not to raise too many ghosts from the sea.

It is those mornings that put Brienne’s mind at ease. Everything takes its usual course. There is nothing out of the ordinary while the whole village is still fast asleep. It’s always the same, day in, day out, getting up, preparing food, getting water from the well, treading through moist grass and sticky mud, watering the animals, over and over, a kind of continuity that she had to labor for hard, after their life was thrown into such turmoil, so much chaos.

Brienne learned to cherish that at a very young age, was forced to realize how precious it is to have those routines, because once you no longer have them, you lose your sense of home, you lose your home, or have lost it already.

And along with it, you lose your sense of self, of who you are.

After flipping the flat loafs of bread over once, Brienne busies herself in her own chamber to shake
out her thin woolen blanket and flip over some of the straw underneath the furs she lies down on at
night.

Brienne moves back into the kitchen once she hears her father’s footsteps shuffling over the wooden
ground.

“A good morning to you, my daughter,” he says over his shoulder, already seated by the table, his
back broad facing towards to her. Brienne walks over to the fireplace to take the breads out of the
pan, to be sure not to burn them.

“A good morning to you, too, Father. You chose a wise time to awake, the bread’s ready now,” she
greets him, putting the bowl with steaming breads down at the center of the small wooden table
while pressing a kiss to the top of her father’s head, which makes him chuckle as Selwyn is well
aware that he is one of the few who get to see that more tender side of his otherwise very wild
dughter.

Brienne loves him fiercely, the Gods know it, with a kind of fervor most people will not be able to
comprehend. However, the way the young woman sees it, her father is the only person of true
concern for her. She cares about her people, no doubt, she would die for each and every one of them,
but the one person of the old world they had to leave in the midst of the night whom she truly loves
is and will forever be her father.

“What would I do without you, sweet child?” Selwyn asks as he takes one of the breads. The jarl
tears it up a few times to let it cool a bit while Brienne motions around the table to sit down next to
him, taking a loaf for herself.

“We both know you’d be lost without me,” she says with a grin, taking a bite of the hot bread.

“You are a grown woman, yet you still cannot bring yourself to listen to my advice to let it cool
down a bit. My daughter, you will burn off your tongue one of these days!”

“I didn’t ever, in case you forgot. Perhaps my tongue is about as resistant to fire as it is sharp as a
knife,” Brienne tells him with a grin, taking another bite for emphasis. “Do you want mead or milk? I
still have some in the barrel from yesterday’s milking.”

“It’s fine for now, thank you,” he tells her, rewarding his daughter with an easy smile.

Yes, Brienne loves those mornings, the ease of them, the familiarity residing within.

And not because they remind her of the time that is no longer, but because that is what they have
now, their small life in their small village, their little world they built for themselves over the years,
far away from the big cities, the big villages, where the jarls are busy fighting over lands and trade
and wedding arrangements to further their interest.

“You make the best rye bread,” her father says as he plops another chunk into his mouth. Brienne
snorts at that, “That is because you only ever got my rye bread to eat.”

“Your mother’s was just about horrific, let me tell you,” her father chuckles softly.

Brienne frowns. “And you never told her that?”

He laughs throatily at that. “She would have killed me with her kitchen knife, I am sure.”

“Well, for all that you told me about her, Mother probably would have. So perhaps it’s better that
you kept that secret to yourself,” Brienne says, chewing on some more bread.
She has only fragments of memories of her mother. Flashes of light, a distant voice that comes to her only in the midst of the night, every once in a while. Her mother died while Brienne was still very young, leaving only few traces in her mind beside those that her father’s stories added over the years.

Sometimes Brienne is unsure if she can actually consider it a fortune that her mother passed before the night that changed everything. A part of Brienne believes that her mother would be happy to have died where she lived for almost all her life, had fallen in love with the man of her choosing, had birthed their children, nursed them, nourished them, kissed them goodnight as they laid in the cradle. Another part of her feels for her father, however. Brienne is fairly certain that Selwyn would have liked to find rest next to her, to join her in the Great Halls of Valhalla.

However, he will never lie beside her in this world, and Brienne has the feeling that her father dreads just that circumstance, even if he always says that he is bound to find her mother again once he travels to Valhalla, and will always find her, the way he once did to make her fall in love with him.

“I found her once, a rare pearl hiding in an oyster’s shell. You’d be foolish to believe that I wouldn’t manage to do it again!” is what her father always tells her when he knows that Brienne can sense his sadness and remorse as he sits on his chair and finds his mind adrift, travelling back to the world they had to leave behind before it turned to ash.

After all, a jarl is supposed to be strong, not to show weakness.

Ever.

“I want to head down to the market later the day, to get some fish. We are short on smoked cod, so I better make new ones before we run out of them. And I need new yarn and wool for my weaving loom,” Brienne says after swallowing another chunk of hot bread. “Is there anything you need?”

Her father sighs, tearing the rye bread apart over and over to pluck some cooler chunks into his mouth. “No, no, I need nothing.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to go all the way down again just because you forgot about the ale that one fellow brews,” Brienne huffs. “I had that often enough with you by now.”

“As I said, I don’t need anything,” he insists. Brienne frowns. While all seems to go its usual ways, there is something strange, and now she can see what it is – it is hiding behind her father’s face, his change of tone, his gaze searching for a fixed point he doesn’t find.

“There seems to be something on your mind, Father,” she says, which has him look at her almost aghast, only to laugh again.

Brienne loves that he laughs so often, with such intensity. At some point she tends to believe that he laughs for the both of them because Brienne rarely does, out in the public at least.

Roelle told me often enough that I should hide those horsey teeth from other people’s view.

Her father looks at her fondly. “You wouldn’t ever know how much you take after your mother. I couldn’t hide anything from her, ever.”

“So? What are you trying to hide then?” Brienne asks.

“I am not hiding anything.”
“But you are not saying what is on your mind,” she argues.

She is stubborn after all, her father long since knows that. He always says that she inherited both his and her mother’s stubbornness, making her perhaps the most willful woman of the village, if not all the lands around.

“Well, as you might recall, it’s this time of the year again…,” her father begins, but that is when howling rings out in the distance, quietening the words on the tip of his tongue. Brienne stands up at once, a sense of danger nagging at her.

“What is Moon up to again?” Selwyn asks with a concerned frown. Brienne motion over to the window to peek through to the mountainside behind their house to see if she can spot Moon or some enemy approaching, but no sign whatsoever.

“I don’t know, I let Moon and Sun out when I got the water. They moved up into the woods, the way they always do,” Brienne says as she gathers axe and shield, sitting beside the door. She hooks the axe through her belt while shouldering the shield to allow for freer movement.

“Brienne, now wait,” her father calls out, already meaning to get up, but Brienne replies, “Wait for what? If it is an enemy, I should be out to slay him.”

“Ring the bell and wait for the others to come,” Selwyn insists.

“That gives away the game,” Brienne argues. “I will see about it. If it is too many, I will come back and get the others. You stay here.”

“I will not!” he persists.

“Your leg is still giving you trouble, so yes, you’ll stay,” Brienne retorts before hurrying out the door.

“Brienne!” he calls after her.

However, the jarl’s daughter is already out the door, out of his reach, because even if Selwyn were to hurry after her, he could not catch up with the bad leg of his. Brienne scrambles up the mount leading towards the woods normally serving as a natural protection against attacks from this side of their lands.

Once she reaches the outskirt of the forest, Brienne can spot the familiar blue and red orbs in the lingering darkness. She raises her arm above her head, and the two direwolves come out of their hideouts to run over to her to press against either side of her legs. Brienne bends down, brushing over their furs once, muttering, “What did you see, hm? Will you show me?”

Sun rushes ahead first – he always does – to guide the way, whereas Moon roams protectively by Brienne’s side – as she always does.

The direwolves couldn’t be more alike while being the same. Sun is a hotspur whereas Moon is very quiet, very mindful of her movements, but at the same time, they hunt the same way, fight over the same things all over – they always quarrel over every chunk of meat handed to them, and they are very protective of their master.

The young woman follows Sun’s lead further into the woods, his brownish fur shining almost golden as light dances through the canopy down upon the fine hairs covering his body.

They reach a small clearing, the wind whipping about Brienne’s face and feet, making her shudder
for a moment as she tries to detect the enemy she still fears hides somewhere amongst the trees and brushes, which are howling in the breeze.

Brienne turns her head when she can hear a rustling of dry leaves, which announces the presence of another person close by. The young woman takes out her axe as her eyes remain on Sun’s red gaze to guide the way, as they have done it many times already, perfected over the years.

Brienne already means to lunge, when she catches sight of a familiar worn robe, dragging across the dry leaves, accompanied by a small wheezing sound and the scraping of feet barely lifting off the ground as they move forward.

“Maggy!” Brienne cries out, sliding the axe through her belt as she approaches with fast strides. The short, old woman with a hunch turns slowly, roughly in Brienne’s direction.

Maggy is their seer, though she cannot see anymore.

Well, not with her own eyes, that is.

Yet, Maggy sees with the ones that the norns granted her instead. While the present is lost to her as the old woman cannot look upon what is happening all around her, Maggy gained a vision reaching back and forth, into future and past, which makes her perhaps the only one to see the world in the ways that matter.

“What are you doing here all alone in the woods? You could have stumbled and fallen, broken a leg…,” Brienne says, grabbing the old woman’s forearm gently, if resolutely.

“Oh, your furry companions led me the way just fine,” Maggy says with a lazy smile, patting Moon as the direwolf moves in beside her. “You trained them well. One should think that one cannot tame a wild beast of the ancient times, such as a direwolf, yet, you command two of them.”

Moon wrinkles her snout when Maggy taps her flat hand on her nose, though the old woman well knows it is the nose she is currently touching. She likes to play games with them on occasion, taking some strange kind of glee in the lack of reaction coming from Moon.

“They act as one most of their time, two sides of the same coin,” Brienne says, glancing at Sun as he move closer to them as well.

Brienne nursed them back to health after she found them abandoned, their mother dead. They were hungry and alone, had no place to go, no place to stay other than beside their mother’s corpse, wailing at the sky above. That was during a time when Brienne felt nothing but loneliness beating in herself like a second heard, so she found two familiar spirits in these animals, if only united in the sad spirit of solitude.

Her father was not pleased at first, believing it too dangerous for a young girl like Brienne to raise two direwolves, but he didn’t dare to tell her no, seemingly having sensed how much young Brienne needed those wolves, how much she found herself in them after she had lost everything, including herself.

At some point, those two creatures are perhaps the closest she will ever get to children. And even if not, they are their most trusted companions now.

“But that still doesn’t answer why you went here all alone,” Brienne goes on to say.

“I dreamed last night,” the old woman informs her.
“Far away?” Brienne asks.

“Close by, actually,” Maggy tells her with a grin.

The old woman always says that she either dreams “far away” or “close by,” depending on how far she dreams into the future. Sometimes it’s years, sometimes it’s only days. Because the Gods make up their own mind and decide how much they mean to reveal.

“What did you see?” Brienne asks as she starts to guide the old seer over the uneven ground.

Maggy licks her chapped, veiny, almost lilac lips, “Dark shadows, rising from the West. Ashes, raining from the sky. A high tide about to crush against our walls, our homes…”

“Another clan will try to rise against us, you mean?” Brienne asks, cold dread clutching at her at the mere thought of it.

“It was bigger than a single clan daring to come to our shores. Clans are all but mist in the air, fading in and out of the world with the first beams of sunlight, but this was fire, sweet child. All-consuming fire and ash,” Maggy says, her hoarse voice slightly shaking as she speaks.

Brienne swallows. “So something else is coming… something bigger.”

*Like the wave that consumed my world?*

“Yes,” the old woman confirms.

“But why would you then want to go to the woods?” Brienne asks with a grimace. “You didn’t have to see about it here, did you?”

“I wanted to consult with the weirwood,” Maggy says.

“You always say the weirwood belong to the Old Gods long since dead,” Brienne reminds her. “And you say that they shall be damned, and we are fools for ever bringing it here.”

The Northerners pray to their Gods, too, but amongst some clans, of that Brienne knows, they also pray to ghosts and gods residing in the trees.

“It can’t harm to consult them anyway. Their ghosts still hold some truths,” the old woman cackles. “Even the dumb ghosts can get right every once in a while!”

“And that was the only reason?” Brienne asks.

“I also saw some shadow in the woods as the future came to me. I wanted to see if that was close by or far away.” Maggy tells her. Brienne sighs at that, “How often do I have to tell you that you shouldn’t be going off on your own?”

Sometimes Brienne feels as though she was the mother to all of the villagers, including their seer and their jarl, and that even though Brienne is anything but a mother!

The old woman rasps amused, “How often do I have to tell you that I am by far too old to bother to care?”

They reach the outskirt of the woods, the ground now steeper. Brienne holds out her arm to guide Maggy’s arm to rest upon it. “Make sure to hold on as I lead you back down, alright? I bet the village will already fuss about you being gone. You shouldn’t forget that while you no longer bother to care, the people here care a lot about what happens to their seer.”
“People tend to rely on that oh too much,” Maggy tells her.

Brienne huffs at that. “What? It’s our faith that you see the future.”

“You also have dreams. How special does that make me in turn?” the old woman snorts.

“Only ever figments,” Brienne reminds her.

And she would rather not have them – or at least forget about them the morning after. Because the figments, however small, only ever leave Brienne in cold sweat, drowned in fear, and on the verge of tears.

“Prophecies are curious things, my child. People tend to believe in them too much, let me tell you as someone who had to suffer through many years of people misinterpreting every damn word spoken by a seer,” Maggy tells her. “In my experience, for most, prophecies are only ever what people want them to be.”

“You foresaw some many things,” Brienne argues. “And not just because people asked you for it. For that, you are too stubborn anyway.”

Maggy nods her head slowly as they waddle their way down the mount. “I see things, but only once it happens do we know how to read those runes, how to make sense of the images, the symbols within. Prophecies are tricky things. Like the God of Mischief, they like to have us be fooled. Prophecies are what you let them be – some allow them control their lives, others don’t. But you will learn that in due time, I am sure, child. There’s still time for you.”

“Careful with the step,” Brienne reminds her.

“Sweet child, you should worry less.”

Worry less? Brienne can’t help but snort at that. “Worry is what keeps me sharp and focused. And now that you had those dreams, we have to be alert ever the more, wouldn’t you agree?”

“You’re still as tight as a bowstring, my dear,” Maggy cackles, groping her arm. “I can feel it.”

Brienne rolls her eyes at that. “Now don’t start me on that, too.”

That is one of those things Brienne had people say about her so very often that she can no longer bear hearing that echo come back to her over and over.

“Oh, you will excuse an old woman having her own queer ways. But perhaps you will learn how to shoot that arrow away, far, far away,” the old woman argues.

“Wouldn’t you think it’s better to keep the arrow to use against an enemy?” Brienne objects. Maggy only ever laughs at that, her curious sort of laughter that soon ebbs into a whistle.

“You still have so much to learn, my dearest child,” Maggy chuckles, tapping the tall woman’s arm lightly.

“Would you like to eat with us?” Brienne asks as they keep making small, careful steps down the hill.

The old woman smiles at her crookedly. “Oh, I thought you’d never ask. That young girl who’s supposed to help me around the house is absolutely useless as a housewife. But at least she is pretty to look at.”
“How would you tell?” Brienne asks, curling her lips into a frown. Maggy cackles at that.

“She sounds like a pretty girl, and the men keep whistling after her as she brings me food and drink,” Maggy chimes, amused. “Oh, and then I heard her fucking that pig of a man close to my stables not long ago. They were at it like rabbits, again and again to the point that I thought it’d scare my pigs away. She is a screamer!”

“Maggy!” Brienne exclaims, feeling a brush creep up her face.

On her old days, Maggy grew ever the quirkier, and for some reason still far beyond Brienne, she took particular pleasure in those kinds of comments and japes.

“Leave an old woman to the joys of making fun of the youths. I am old, crusted, wrinkly, and crunching with every step I take. I have to make fun of someone other than me. Why not that dull girl who doesn’t know how to scale a fish?”

Brienne blows air up her face to keep some loose strands out of her blue eyes. “Maybe Sassa needs more time.”

“You think I have that much time left? I am old, I get to be impatient,” Maggy argues. “Even more so because the girl has enough time to scale some many men’s salmons, but still fails at the task of prepping one up for us to eat.”

“Maggy.”

“She simply better hurry up. That girl will wind up with child soon enough so long she keeps spreading her milky thighs for any runaway karl or thrall who looks at her the right way. And then marrying her off will be even more difficult than it is anyways to marry off a good-for-nothing, not-even-a-shieldmaiden, let-alone-a-maiden girl who is a screamer on tops.”

“But it’s as you say, she is pretty,” Brienne argues, rolling her broad shoulders.

That always does the trick for men, at least in Brienne’s experience. Because quite the opposite is true for her. She can very well do all the duties it would require, but as ugly and mannish as she is, not even a runaway karl or thrall would be willing to take her for wife.

Not that Brienne minds, of course, because she won’t have any runaway karl or thrall either. She doesn’t need that, the Gods foretold her that much, too.

“She is pretty and pretty dull,” Maggy snorts.

“As far as I am concerned, men quite like that about women.”

*Which is why they don’t like me, don’t want me. Ever.*

Brienne can still vividly recall when her father took her to the annual gathering of the jarls, the *althings*. It is supposed to help find young women a suitable match, too, while also handling the clans’ businesses, which should be far more important, though most fathers will use just that occasion to find their sons and daughters a suitable match and work on a dowry with the spouse’s father.

*And that proved to be a series of disasters for me.*

“But that’s not the women they should want, if they were right in their minds. They need the sturdy women, the sinewy women, with broad shoulders and broad hips to bear the next generation. Frailty is such a foolish concept. Who’d want to sit on a twig if he can sit on a mighty branch?”
“Well, that is how people think,” Brienne chuckles softly, glancing at the ground to be sure to step on steady soil so that the old woman won’t slip.

“And people are foolish,” Maggy huffs, clicking her tongue to make her disappointment about the matter known. Though Brienne can’t bring herself to object to that – Maggy has the rights of it, people are foolish.

They reach the house, where Selwyn is already on the front porch, glancing on nervously, only ever letting relief wash over him once he sees them approach.

“What happened?” the jarl asks.

Brienne can see Moon and Sun move to their usual spot by the stone ledge off to the left of their house, to catch the first rays of warm sunlight raining down on their furs, painting them golden and silver.

Maggy lets out a loud, shrill laugh, snapping Brienne’s attention back to her and her father, “You will excuse, Jarl Selwyn, but I seem to have gotten lost on my morning stroll, but your dear daughter was kind enough to find me.”

“How did you even get up there in the first place, Maggy?” Selwyn asks.

“You just need time and patience,” the old seer tells him with a crooked grin, before shaking her left foot in his direction. “That, and good boots.”

“Ah,” he says with a big frown.


She always knows what people do, even tough she cannot see it.

“So, Brienne said that you have some bread for me to spare. I must say that the morning stroll left me starving for some good old rye bread,” Maggy goes on to hum almost gleefully. “Needless to mention that I don’t get any good to eat down in the village.”

“You know that you are always welcome into our home, Maggy,” Selwyn tells the old woman, flashing him her typical crooked grin, showing her yellowed and missing teeth.

Brienne leads the old woman inside, but Maggy stops once she stands next to Selwyn. “Now, my good Jarl, I have a question for you, one of true importance.”

“Yes?”

“What is your opinion on little, unable-to-bake-good-rye-bread, promiscuous girls who happen to be screamers?”

“MAGGY!”

Brienne rolls her shoulders as she makes her way back home. Training with the youths is always strenuous, not because anyone would stand a chance against her, far from it, but Brienne has to show them the same moves over and over until their arms knows how to do them before their minds have to command their bodies to set into motion.
To raise one’s shield to protect oneself and others has to be a memory of the body as well as of the mind, it has to be part of the flesh, the body, an extension of it.

Brienne likes training the young well enough. They only ever get difficult once they grow to be men – because only then does it occur to them that a woman training them is an odd thing and does something to their perception of strength and what it takes to be a warrior.

The girls are easiest to handle because they tend to admire Brienne, so long they seek to become shieldmaidens under her watch.

The other women around the village? They mean nothing but trouble for me, just like the men. Seemingly, they all start making trouble once they grow older.

At least that is her experience. It may well be different for most others, but then again, Brienne is well aware that she is unlike anyone she met outside her family. Men are at least rather straightforward in not approving of her, which is something Brienne finds herself being able to deal with considerably easy. They will laugh at her or tease her on occasion, forgetting her position as the Jarl’s daughter more often than they should, and more than her father would permit if he were to hear of it. However, the women carry it in their eyes and fake smiles as they see Brienne roll in the sand with another youth she means to teach a lesson about combat. And that is something Brienne finds herself struggling with. It is a fight without axe, without shield or sword, which is why she often feels more exposed than she does to comment that come to her by men who like to have their fun at her expenses.

It’s odd to Brienne the more she thinks about it. Being a shieldmaiden should be a respectable position, even if it is a thing of rarity especially in their regions, admittedly. Being a Jarl’s daughter is a respectable position. Being Selwyn Tarth’s, the Evenstar’s, daughter is a respectable position. Yet, she has to fight for every ounce of respect, every glance of appreciation and acknowledgment, and it may falter and collapse the next moment, for no other reason but Brienne walking around the village dressed in men’s attire, hair shorter than most women wear it, or going about businesses in her father’s stead ever since that incident that left him with the bad leg.

To Brienne’s understanding, there are three forces at work here: For one, she is a woman not uncomfortable as a soldier, wearing the clothes, moving like a man, talking like one, commanding men and women alike, and showing that even when it’s no time for an attack. Brienne does not retreat to her role as a woman of the house for all to see, and somehow that seems to irk people, too, because they believe she doesn’t have that side to herself. And Brienne can’t find it in herself to bother to care to convince them of the opposite.

At the same time, Brienne is still unwed, and that even though some women are younger than her and already bear their second or third child, or long since have a second husband after the first one came to pass during one of the raids or attacks from their enemies coming to their shores. Some women joked during one of the feasts that Brienne may die a spinster at this rate. One girl who thought herself very smart commented that maybe the Jarl’s daughter should try to find herself a woman instead, and just act as the man, the way Brienne always does.

Well, for all they know.

And lastly, Brienne is ugly, mannish, and freakish tall, freckled with short-cropped hair that looks more like straw than gold, a look that only she seems to unite in one strong, ungainly body. Some people still tend to think her to be a bastard child to her father and the ancient giantess Skaði. Though Brienne knows as a matter of fact that the giantess of the old tales was not the one who gave life to her. While her memories of her mother are faint, she was not Skaði, Brienne is fairly certain of that. And her father would likely boast about the matter, if he had been wed to an ancient giantess, after
all. Nevertheless, people tend to be foolishly scared of her. When Brienne was still younger, some of the smaller children would run away whenever she approached the village, shouting in fear that the giants were coming.

These days, the children, or at least some of them, are perhaps the only ones standing on her side, because Brienne tends to them when not everyone else does. Some lost their mothers, some lost their fathers, some are broken things.

Einar is one of those broken things. His left forearm had to be amputated after he stuck his hand down the jetty to grab a toy that had fallen into the water below. He didn’t anticipate the boat to swing against the jetty in the strong tide of the time. Thus, the arm was broken badly, leaving them with no choice but to take it off after the infection threatened to kill the young boy. Brienne took particular interest in Einar after the men told him that he could never be a warrior with such an injury. She was the only one who told him otherwise and has Einar train his left upper arm to hold the shield instead, by strapping it down to his shoulder. The young boy still has a lot to learn, and it remains an open question if Einar is ever to join a serious raid, but Brienne would rather die than tell a child not to work towards earning his place in the great halls of the Allfather, if there is a way for him to earn his honor, earn his seat among the Gods.

Even if he doesn’t join us on the battlefields, his strong arm may come to protect the village one day, and then it will be him who will laugh at the men for ever having doubted him.

Einar cares about Brienne fiercely. He even gets a bit possessive of her every now and then because the boy would rather have Brienne train only him. The other children whom Brienne gives the first lessons to care about her the same way because Brienne gives them something to do, much to the young boy’s disappointment.

So yes, Brienne is far better off with the children for all she cares.

Children are plain as day honest. She’d rather have every child believe her a giantess to run off in fear than the whispers in her back, mumbled over horns filled with ale and mead, hidden behind fake smiles, and hands held over the bearded mouths as though not having Brienne see them speak would undo the words from entering the world and taking root there.

But rarely do we get what we desire most…

Brienne finally makes it to the house, Sun and Moon instantly running up to her to greet her. They were quite disappointed that she didn’t take them with her to the village below, but Brienne knows that the mothers tend to be scared of the direwolves, for the sake of their children, which Brienne does understand.

Even though Sun and Moon have protected just those children numerous times.

“That any trouble while I was gone?” she asks. Moon tilts her head as they continue walking up the path leading to the house. While they obviously don’t understand the common tongue, the direwolves seem to have a sense for what Brienne means to say, which is why she sees little opposition to talking to them every now and then.

They are perhaps the best conversation partners I happen to have, Brienne thinks to herself, amused, as she climbs the steps leading towards the house. At least they listen.

“Father, I am back!” she calls out as she enters, leaving her shield and axe by the small stool set by the door.
“You are late,” Selwyn greets her, offering a small smile, sitting by the table, sharpening his dagger on a whetstone.

“Garth is rather slow on the uptake. He still has no idea whatsoever how to make a proper lowcut. I had to show it to him for about an hour. You know, one of these days, my shoulder will not be bad from battle, but from teaching Garth how to make a proper lowcut. And what a waste that would be!”

Brienne walks up to the small basin by the kitchen to wash her face and hands, relishing the cool sensation against her heated skin.

“You shouldn’t overdo it,” he tells her.

“Father!” Brienne groans. “I am a warrior. Training some youths is nothing compared to fighting for life and death during an attack, let’s not pretend.”

“Normally, I would take over some of it, but…,” he means to say, but Brienne interrupts him, “Stop it. You can’t do it at this point of time. I like doing it. I train the shieldmaidens anyway, so why not some young men who have not yet learned to disrespect me? Maybe that brings about some change?”

Because that is what they have been chasing, already back in their old life, a change, an interruption in the world’s ongoing cycle of endless repetition. And while it didn’t work in that old life, the two still dare to hope to make it happen now, hidden away from the eyes of most others, too small for most to even bother to go looking for them and their little fjord somewhere by the Fingers.

“I fear that is more of wishful dreaming, my sweet daughter,” Selwyn sighs.

“Probably yes,” Brienne agrees, wrinkling her nose as she undoes the leather bound around her forearms that she normally wears to the training so that a wooden sword won’t have her too badly bruised. After all, the youths tend to have a very poor aim.

“Are there any news?” he asks.

“Not really,” Brienne answers as she unlaces her leather vest. “I talked to Maggy briefly. She really doesn’t seem to like Sassa. She says the girl wants to starve her. I suppose I will have to see about Sassa finally taking some lessons from the older women, or seeing to it that Maggy gets more of our food instead.”

“Talk to the other women. It’s their business to teach the young girls just those duties. You already fulfill too many of those low tasks already, as the jarl’s daughter,” Selwyn insists.

Brienne sighs. “Father.”

“What?” he huffs, his dagger clanking against the whetstone. “You know it’s the truth I am speaking. It’s enough that you have to occupy all of our property. You should have the youngsters working more for you. You have to learn to delegate the tasks.”

Brienne rolls her eyes at him as it always seems to be the same with her father on that matter. “I want it to be done properly. That is how I ensure that they don’t screw up my crops. I grew those seedlings all by myself. I won’t have Garth and his friends stomp them to pulp. They are clumsy like that. You have seen them fight!”

“You have to teach them, then. They won’t learn it unless you show them how,” her father argues.
“The others can have them work on their properties to train them, I don't care. I won't let them near our fields until they have learned it,” Brienne retorts.

This is her home, and Brienne will not have it invaded, ever again, not even by some youths who yet have to find their place in the village, in the world. She labored so hard, sacrificed so much, for this place to feel like home, and no, the jarl’s daughter will not allow for it to be taken over. If that means that she has to labor twice as much, then so be it.

“As the Jarl’s daughter, delegating is an important duty you have to learn, my dear daughter. That is how the women and men will learn to respect you,” Selwyn lectures her.

“They can respect me for putting food in their stomachs, defending their home, and training their youths to do the same. If they can’t bring themselves to it despite that fact, then that is not my concern,” Brienne insists.

“It has to be your concern,” her father argues more forcefully this time.

Brienne frowns at him, crossing her arms over her flat chest, sensing the tension in the room. “What is the matter with you, Father?”

“The matter is that you have to learn to act more like a jarl’s daughter, for your own sake, Brienne. You act like a peasant girl and shieldmaiden, not like a jarl’s daughter,” her father tells her.

Brienne rolls her broad shoulders with a blank grimace. “Well, we are farmers and warriors, so I suppose that is in fact quite fitting.”

Selwyn puts down the dagger with a chink.

“You are no simple farmer, no peasant girl, you are…,” he means to say, but Brienne interrupts him, “That is over. You know it better than I do, Father.”

Selwyn bows his head.

It is true, they were more once. They had more. They had to worry about nothing, until they had to worry about everything. Until everything was ripped away from them.

Turned to ash.

And cast into the winds.

“We live a smaller life, so that makes me a peasant girl as much as it makes me a shieldmaiden. If it worries you so much that I overwork myself, rest assured that I don’t. I am sturdy without a doubt, Father. Even the other women give me that much, despite their misgivings. I like the work well enough. And those tasks that I don’t like, I don’t bother doing anyway,” Brienne reassures him. “I rather have it this way than constantly frustrating myself with having to suffer through everyone doing it not the way it is supposed to be done.”

“And that is the thing,” her father insists. “You do it alone, and so you stay alone.”

“I don’t need the others for that. You said it to me, remember? As a child, when we came here. *We are the tree stem, holding up the branches, which are our people.* Your words, Father, and I believe them with all my heart,” Brienne tells him, tapping her palm against her flat chest. “I am the backbone, they are the rips, arms, and legs. I don't see why I have to let them be the fingers to poke at me now, too.”
“Because you are my daughter and your position is another, even if smaller now than it would have been back in the day. You stand above them, yet you crawl on the ground,” Selwyn argues, curling his lips into an angry grimace.

“As I know, I am taller than most,” she huffs. “So I have to bend down more often than not.”

He sighs, pitching the bridge of his flat nose. “That is not what I mean.”

“I am aware. I am just jesting,” she argues, looking at him with growing irritation. It’s very much unlike him to act that way. “Father, what makes you so upset? It’s not like I started that behavior only just yesterday. What is changed now?”

Selwyn lets out a weary breath. “Nothing is changed, I just see it happen, day in, day out. And I worry about you.”

“You don’t have to worry about me,” Brienne insists, shaking her head.

He looks at her with determination and affection. “I always do, I always will. You are everything I have left in this world, the Gods know it, and I thank them daily for you, for that they let me keep you.”

Brienne gives his shoulder a gentle squeeze. “I am sorry if I grieved you. It was not my intention, Father.”

“I know that you just do what you feel you must, but… this is… this is not what it should be,” he argues, shaking his head, rubbing his hand over his bad leg.

“Then what should it be?” she questions. Selwyn licks his lips. Brienne tilts her head to the side. “Wait, is that about what you wanted to tell me short before Moon howled because of Maggy wandering through the woods all alone?”

“Yes,” he confirms.

“Then what is it about?” she wants to know.

Her father straightens up slightly, harrumphs himself, before he goes on to say, “Well, as I was about to say back then… it’s this time of the year. The althing is about to take place, you might recall.”

“I know,” Brienne agrees, nodding her head. “I do hope that we will finally succeed in convincing the other jarls of better peace treaties to form sturdier alliances at last, through trade rather than raid. This has gone on for far too long already.”

Brienne believes that to be the only way to guarantee peace and prosperity, but she fears that people will never understand what Brienne sees as evident truth, for she has seen it in reality, not just in dreams and prophecies. Brienne knows it can work, she lived in that safe haven for four years, where there was this peace, palpable, within reach, peace you could touch, feel, taste.

Until it was disrupted, destroyed, annihilated, burned down to the ground.

But till that day, it was the stability in a world that seems displaced most of its time. It was this peace that held up the small cosmos they called their own, and it was good. And Brienne still dares to hope that one of these days, the great Jarls will understand that this is the only way to build a steady future, that this is the only way to grow for themselves the world tree Yggdrasil within this their world, right at the center of Midgard, among themselves. She prays to Frigga every night that she will make the jarls listen to reason at last, and put their quarrels of the present aside in favor of a future not just built
on stilts, but sitting on top of a solid foundation of wood and stone and shared effort.

“That is not what I meant to say,” Selwyn argues.

“Then what?” Brienne frowns.

That is one of the things they discuss constantly, sitting by the fire place, breaking rye bread, sharpening their weapons. It bears more chances to ponder the future instead of lingering in the past that turned to ash in their mouths.

“You know what is part of the usual business that comes at the althing. One of the reasons why I take you with…, he says, his voice trailing off towards the end, and that is when Brienne knows.

“Not that again,” she groans, holding her hand to her forehead in exasperation. Brienne starts to walk circles on the other side of the table.

That is yet another matter they constantly discuss, though Brienne would rather discuss the peace than this folly, because that is part of a past she would rather forget, wipe out of the world, drown in the well Urðr.

“I wouldn’t if I didn’t have to. I know that you don’t fancy thinking about those matters, but would rather take a ship to discover some new land with shield and axe in hand, but those matters are important, and you know it true, daughter,” Selwyn insists, pushing his dagger across the table with growing frustration, as though he meant to underline that he is sick of her fighting in particular.

Brienne snaps her jaws together with a clank of her teeth. “And I may remind you that the men there wouldn’t ever want me because I look the way I look and act the way I act. Frigga was my witness, I wore a fine dress to the occasion, and the men only ever called me a sow in silks!”

“I know all that, but you may also recall that one of them was not entirely opposed to the idea,” Selwyn argues. Brienne whips her head around to look at him, her eyes almost ablaze with anger.

That opens up some very old wounds.

Brienne bangs her palms down on the table. “You cannot be sincere. I told you that I would rather die than even consider that mule of a man. You do recall what he did last time we saw one another, yes?”

“He was a lad by the time, green as summer grass, foolish and chasing approval by his peers,” her father tells her, which only gets Brienne’s anger ever the more flaring.

“You wouldn’t dare to make excuses for him, would you?” she asks, her eyes all but narrow slits, but this time, it is her father who seems seriously offended.

“Daughter, you know me better than that. I would have loved to open his throat already back then for such effrontery,” Selwyn curses.

“Maybe you should have;” Brienne mutters, straightening back up to hug her arms, feeling her anger deflating a bit at once. She knows that her father doesn’t mean to shame her by saying so, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t sting.

That doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt. Because the past is unchangeable, whereas the future is full of hopes, and in the past, there is nothing but this steady, unmoving bit of shame that is now part of her story.
Selwyn licks his lips, searching for the words lying on the tip of them. “The point is… I have talked
to his father, last time I was on that trip across the fjord.”

And while Brienne found her anger leaving her for a second, it's right back now, rising up and down
like a gigantic wave on the verge of collapse. “On that trip you wouldn’t take me along with, you
mean? Oh, so now I know why that was so! You moved behind my back to start making
arrangements with that oaf and the son of an oaf for a good dowry?!”

“I didn’t go there for only just that purpose. I went there to talk about trade with their jarl,” her father
insists, keeping his voice leveled. “But I met him, true enough, and we talked. His father was very
apologetic about what his son did back during that althing. But he is a grown man now. You should
have seen him! As strong as an ox.”

“And as dull as one, too, I am sure,” Brienne grumbles.

At least he was the last time I’ve seen him. And men tend to change slowly, if at all.

“He, too, apologized for what happened back then. Hyle admitted that he felt driven to the task
because his friends kept pressuring him,” Selwyn continues.

“Which doesn’t make it any better,” Brienne retorts, shaking her head.

If anything, it proves my point – he is a weakling not worth the attention!

“It does not, but he also expressed that he would like to ma…,” her father means to say, but Brienne
is quick enough to interrupt him before he can get to the point, “To marry me? Oh, what a joy,
Father! What a joy! That dull oaf believes that he can just have me back after he apologized to you?
What about me? What about me and my shame I bear thanks to him and his friends ever since that
day?”

Brienne taps against her chest, her heart beating incredibly faster out of sheer anger and agitation.
They shamed her father and her family by humiliating her, but they also brought shame upon her as a
person.

For having me believe that they’d want me...

“Well, perhaps it’d be best if he came here, for visit. So that he could apologize to you in person,”
Selwyn tries to debate. “To see where it goes from there.”

“To see where it goes from there? And then all is fair, so he gets to gather the wager he and his
friends had on my maidenhead?” she snaps.

“Brienne.”

The young woman throws her hands in the air, not knowing how else to control her anger, because it
runs deep, deep, right to her bones, sets them ablaze. It’s one thing to make fun of her, but those men
shamed her and meant to destroy the bit of worth that comes with her sex. Brienne can live with
comments, can live with jokes at her expenses, the whispers, even, however painful some of them
may be. Yet, she will not accept to be shamed, even less so by a man her father now seemingly
believes to have regrown to being worthy of her after he, after years of nothing, after years of silence,
brought himself to apologize for the way he shamed Brienne and her family.

And not even on his own accord! It’s not like he dared to set sail here to come to apologize, Brienne
thinks to herself. *Though then again… I would have killed him for it, most likely, so that may have been reasonable after all…*

“No! Just no! I will never marry that man! Never! You hear me? *Never!* Then I rather die a spinster!” Brienne shouts, nostrils flaring, voice rising like a wave about to crush.

“You should not talk to me in such a way, daughter,” Selwyn warns her, but Brienne won’t have it, not on that matter, no. “And you should not demand that of me, Father.”

“I don’t demand, I ask.”

“By starting to make wedding arrangements without consulting me first?” she huffs.

He snorts at that. “As though you would have agreed, had I told you.”

“Which should prove to you that I don’t want it, at all, don’t want him, at all,” Brienne snarls. “I don’t need him to run the household for me. I know how to handle myself – and I know how to handle the people of our village. If the people won’t help, I will do it all by myself, I don’t care. But for that, I don’t have to live in the same that such a union would come with.”

*I don't need anyone but my father. The rest can go to Hel for all I care.*

“You cannot do everything by yourself, Brienne,” her father sighs.

“Oh, I can, just watch me, Father.”

“No, you can’t. You can’t stay alone in this world,” he argues, sadness resonating with his voice along with the anger and frustration.

Brienne shakes her head. “I rather stay alone than by someone’s side who is not deserving of it.”

“You are not getting any younger,” he argues, more or less out of the blue. Brienne curls her lips into a frown.

“I am aware,” she huffs, so he goes on to add, “And I am not getting any younger either, which is something we have to bear in mind, Brienne.”

“Well, that is not the last *althing* I am to attend, right? Maybe someone comes by one of the following years?” Brienne huffs. “And imagine the shame it’d be to meet that man, while I am wed off to weakling like *Hyle Hunt the Cunt*.”

“He is an option you should consider.”

“You promised me that I would get to marry a man of my own choosing. You *promised* me, Father!” Brienne insists, sadness starting to replace burning anger, leaving her with all but a chill deep inside her.

She prided herself with that, that her father was so respectful of her and her wishes, understood that his daughter was one of a kind and didn’t see the bad in it.

*What changed about that all of a sudden? Just what happened on the other side of the fjord?*

“And I do mean to keep it,” Selwyn says with resolution.

She frowns at him incredulously. “By starting to make arrangements with *that oaf*?!”
Selwyn looks her deep in the eye, and Brienne can spot the same concern and affection in his eyes that she has known since she was all but a girl. “Yes, because I have to think about your future, my beloved daughter.”

“What now?” she asks, quieter now.

“You cannot become Jarl. The people would never accept it, you know it better than I do. They already struggle to see you as the Jarl’s daughter, which you undoubtedly are! I wish it were different, I’ve tried, but they will not move out of their ways. And neither will those karls and jarls at the althings.”

“Yes, I know all that,” Brienne agrees, rolling her wrist.

That is why she is bound to do so much by herself. Because the men won’t follow her once they come of age. Because the women are too busy laughing at her queer ways instead of seeing Brienne for the Jarl’s daughter she apparently happens to be.

“That means that once I pass, a new jarl will rise from the karls, and it’d seem most likely that he’d mean to take you to bride because we inherit most of the lands and most of the treasures,” he goes on.

“Well, problem solved!” she snorts.

“You know how I mean it.”

“Yes, I know all that, Father.”

It should have been Galladon. It always should have been Galladon.

He would have continued the lineage, he would have become the next Jarl, no doubt, if only the sea had not taken him away, had not ripped him from their shaking, cold hands as they were tossed around by a storm set ablaze.

And sometimes, or rather, more often than she’d like to admit to herself, Brienne wished she had been born a man, had been born the second son to Jarl Selwyn, if only to save her and her father all of that trouble that comes with her sex, the trouble others attach to it because they can’t move out of their old ways.

“You know, but you don’t want to see, my sweet, sweet daughter,” he argues, his voice now anguished. Brienne blinks as he puts his old, calloused, veiny hands on top of hers. “If we don’t make plans about your future being secured while I am still alive, you may be in danger once I come to pass. Who tells me that one of them will not force himself upon you to secure his position as Jarl? Will not kill you to earn your wealth? I trust these men with my life, but not with yours. Wealth makes monsters of most of us – we’ve seen it back home.”

“They’d have to manage first,” she huffs. Selwyn grabs her arm tightly with his free hand. “Brienne. Listen to me. If you have a husband and bear him children, you will be secure even after I pass. You’d pose no threat, but at the same time have the villagers’ respect.”

She pushes away from him, feeling bad for giving him that bit more pain, but she has to walk, or else she will lose her senses and only scream again.

Brienne licks her lips, blowing out air through her nostrils. “And of all men there are, you want to choose that man for me? Hyle wouldn’t know his own mind if his friends did not command it. He may be as strong as an ox when it comes to the might in his body, but he is and will always be weak
Selwyn nods his head. “Precisely.”

Brienne frowns. Back in the day, her father used to tell her how “only the very best” would get to try out to win her favor. Before she was even allowed to come to an althing, he built up those magical althings inside her head, spun tails about them, how all important people gathered there in one place to decide like the norns decide over all their fate, where there was dance and honor and happiness, young men, all wanting to dance with her, all wanting to fall in love with her.

Surely, Brienne was only just a child back then, but during a time where they had nothing and had to fight for everything, it seemed to be a great comfort to dream away to a place and time where she would find a place within another person’s heart, to battle off the loneliness Brienne’s felt deep inside her ever since the raging storm destroyed her home, tore out her roots and tossed her into the ocean along with everyone else. Yet, it was her father who encouraged her to dream away to those distant places as though they were palpable, as though they were real. He spoke about young Jarls, young karls, and how she would have to make a wise choice over who to choose out of the masses.

And now… a grown woman, Brienne seemingly has to accept that she has no choice at all, because the place she dreamed away to as a young child not yet knowing what ugliness meant was not real. Whereas the real place of the althing only offers the sobering truth that no one, in his right mind, would choose her.

Well, safe for Hyle Hunt the Cunt, that is.

“Now what? He is not worthy much of anything.” Brienne can’t help but argue anyway. “His father is no jarl. They are karls, no more, no less. Not even particularly wealthy ones, as far as I am concerned. Let alone influential. Why should I wed this nobody of a man who thought he could cheat me out of my maidenhead with a single training session?”

Though perhaps she feels most shame not so much for his vile act, but much more for ever having fallen for the idea. Despite the fact that Brienne should have known better. Roelle told her often enough to look at herself in the looking glass, taught her about her ugliness, the truth of it.

Who would want me if he can have… any other?

“Because he is no jarl’s son, because he is just like that. Which is why Hyle is so well suited for this purpose,” Selwyn explains. Brienne’s frown deepens. “What??”

Her father licks his lips, searches her eyes, and finds them. “My sweet child, more than anything, I want to leave those lands we now call our own to you. I want them to be yours. I want you to continue protecting our people in my stead. I want you to be home.”

He looks aside, seemingly feeling ashamed himself for having to admit that. “Back when we were… home, it would have been different. Your title would have protected you better, but it’s gone now. I am only just a lesser jarl, and jarls come and go like the ebb and flow. I cannot bequeath you with the title I bear now. You cannot have it for matters of your sex. That is what the rules command, and what you will find people say at any gathering, at any althing. They would not listen to you, no matter what truths you would be speaking.”

“I know,” Brienne says, her voice barely audible. It is rare for her to capture a glance of her father’s desperation. He normally knows well to conceal it. He had to. When all felt weak and wounded, he stood up as the Jarl and gave them strength to pull through the storm, the times of exile.
But you can’t be strong all the time.

“But if you have someone by your side who will follow your lead, and looks as though he was the one making the calls, though he does not, then you can be a jarl in all but name,” Selwyn explains. “And far more importantly, you would be Jarl of your home. You would not be taken away to stranger lands. He would be here with you. You would stay home, with your people, and no one would dare to take you away again.”

Brienne blinks at him. She never thought he’d have such a plan in mind.

“And for that I am supposed to have him... wed me, bed me? After all he’s done to me to get to the latter without properly following through the former first?” Brienne asks anyway, because the mere thought makes her feel sick.

“I fear there is little choice left as of now. You will have to wed at some point, my daughter,” her father argues.

“And as we know, the men don't want me. They fear me. Which is ridiculous, considering that shieldmaidens are of honor,” Brienne huffs.

Needless to mention that she can cook, keep the farm, grow crops, is a hard worker, and is not barren, despite what people tend to say about her.

It’s as Maggy said – men are foolish.

“If we follow through with the plan early on, you can take up on more of my tasks for all to see, can learn to delegate, can learn to act like a true daughter of a jarl, so that the people will not question you making the orders though your husband who would be called Jarl in my stead. The sooner your husband would live around here, the better, which would make it ever the more favorable if the marriage took place little time from now. Then the others will proclaim him Jarl without much effort. He’d be treated as one of their own. And you would make him yours to be the jarl these people need, though they don’t seem to know it.”

“You cannot be sincere,” she hisses, shaking her head.

“I am. I am sincere, very sincere. I just want you to be secure, my daughter.”

“Secure? With a man who’d never survive a fight like we fought them against true enemies?” Brienne snaps. “And in any case, so long I know how to defend our lands, know to defend myself, what does it matter if I wed and bear that oaf children? I want to go down in war, Father, I want to be in Valhalla, right next to you by the great table where the Allfather will welcome all our warriors.”

They talked about it many times, as they set sail, fought off enemies, hunched over in the boat, ready to fight, fingers flexing around their weapons.

He knows that this is what she wants.

He knows it in his heart.

And now he wants to deny me even that?

Brienne can feel wetness climb to her eyes, though she does not allow tears to form.

“I know all that,” Selwyn says, bowing his head.
“Then why would you want to tie me to the kitchen table instead?” Brienne asks, her voice full of anguish this time. “To his?”

“Because I need you to continue our lineage,” he says, with equal measures of pain wearing his voice down, wearing him down.

Brienne sucks in a deep, shuddered breath. “I told you often enough that you should take a new bride and make another son.”

“I cannot,” Selwyn insists.

“You do not want to!” Brienne growls, not knowing where to put her anger and sadness as the forces keep fighting for dominance within her.

“I would, if only to unburden you, my child. I would, I really would, but…,” he argues, though she interrupts him, “But what?”

Selwyn lets out a long sigh, rubbing his hands over his thighs. “Short before they came to plunder our home, I went to the seer there. He’s had a vision.”

She frowns. “You never told me about it.”

“I didn’t want to burden you with my own prophecies. You have to deal with those you have already in plenty, wearing you down,” her father says, offering a gentle kind of grimace.

Brienne looks at him sadly.

“The seer said to me that my bloodline was the Trident, and that the Trident was cast black and red before seizing to carry water. One arm for Arianne, one for Alysanne, and one for Galladon. Their blood stopped flowing, their lines ended,” he goes on, before extending his hand to her again. “But yours is meant to go on.”

“Perhaps I am destined to die the same way and leave no traces?” Brienne argues. “Maybe I am so utterly unimportant that I don’t even get an arm of the Trident, ever crossed your mind, Father?”

“You are at a marriageable age, you are fertile. Your sisters and your brother all died before they could come of age. But you have grown to full bloom. You can continue our lineage, you can carry our blood. You can carry it to a new generation, a new age,” her father insists, now almost in a frenzy, which is little wonder, Brienne supposes. Apparently, he has been carrying that secret around with him for years.

“By mixing it with oaf blood?” she can’t help but remark.

“If you must?”

“Oh please.”

“Listen to me, Brienne. My blood was cursed, I know it now. That is why that tragedy happened back home. To take Galladon as the last arm of my Trident’s bloodline. That is why the Gods took your sisters, and your brother, my heir. That is what the Gods wanted, the seer’s foretold it.”

Brienne blinks, eyes glistening, when her father runs his rough hand over her cheek. “But you? You can continue the lineage, carry it to the next age. And you must. You are the last of our kind, my
sweet daughter. You have the fire in your blood and you need to carry it on, to bring the Evenstar back to rise and shine in the night’s sky. The seer told me that there is the Evenstar’s light shining down on the Trident after the darkness. It has to be you. You are to be the Evenstar, your children are meant to rise to the firmament, held up by the world tree Yggdrasil. I am sure of it. So yes, you must continue our lineage. So that your children and their children can rise again from the ash that once was Tarth.”

Brienne tears his hand away from her cheek, averts her gaze. She turns her back to him, not wanting her father to see the tears on the verge of falling as she speaks, “I told you I had a dream. I told you that the Gods gave me this vision when I flowered for the first time, as I sat by the weaving loom for a new dress. I wove my destiny that day. The norns foretold it! That the only man I’d marry would best me in fight. The Gods gave me that vision of the future the same way the seer told you about the Trident beneath the Evenstar. You ask me to defy mine own destiny! The one the Gods foretold!”

“But your suitor may…,” Selwyn means to say, but Brienne is having none of it, snapping her head back around to him, “He’d never manage to beat me. Hyle would die in the attempt! He is weak. You said it yourself. But the Gods told me that I would only ever wed a man who would best me in fight. And no one has yet, though I have fought many wars by now. None of them managed to beat me. None of them! And perhaps that is what they are trying to tell me, that there is no man for me. Because no one beats me. The Gods have spoken, Father. Who are we to interfere?”

Brienne believes in the Gods, and she believes in the Gods’ justice. If that is the path they have chosen for her, she will accept it, but Brienne is not willing to yield to earthly ideas if they mean to defy the holy purpose that was sent to her in a vision, in a dream of the future, woven like the norns do it, clad in crimson and with hair as golden as the sun.

“Maybe it wasn’t someone else you saw in your vision but you yourself, my daughter. Ever thought about that?” he asks.

“I don’t know…,” she replies slowly.

“Maybe you are meant to choose yourself in the end, maybe that is what the Gods tried to tell you. I only ever understood what the vision meant once it was too late. And if you marry Hyle, you will get to choose yourself. You will be Jarl in all but name. You will lead your people, if not directly, if not at once. But if you prove yourself, then maybe they will change their minds after all, and proclaim you Jarl, will see you as the leader you are meant to be. And meanwhile, you may find tender feelings in your heart for him at last – or even if not, form him to the man he needs to be to deserve being by your side. I know you can do that. Perhaps that is what the visions tried to tell you, that you have to weave your own future.”

“I dare doubt it,” Brienne says, barely moving her jaws apart as she speaks.

A part of her dares to believe it, actually. But Brienne doesn’t want to believe, doesn’t want that to be true. Brienne always consoled herself with the secret knowledge that, one day, the promised partner would stand by her side, would come to her, and that the Gods would have chosen him for her, to make all of the jests, all the insults, all the jokes, all the pain she took over the years, worth it – and if not, at least leave her with honor to console her. Because no matter how much Brienne tries to have others believe the opposite, she, too, seeks those things. Stability, home, someone outside herself to turn back into herself, someone by her side, someone to love, someone who loves her, only ever her. But if she isn’t granted it, then she will choose honor any day, no doubt.

“Doubt it or not, but we need to be sure that you stay where you are, with a husband by your side to protect you from being married off against your will or killed once I am no longer,” Selwyn insists. “When I am gone, the other men will be made responsible for your marriage arrangements, as the old
rules have it. If we don’t want them to make those choices only to their advantage, we have to act before they can get to it.”

“Then why not another jarl or a jarl’s son, at least? Why not someone who is… at least somewhat important? Why that oaf who is all but dust in the wind?” Brienne argues.

Perhaps not the shining creature who appeared to her in her dreams, fine, but Brienne cannot imagine that the Gods would want that of her.

Or would they? Do they think that lowly of me?

“Because he is below you. A jarl who’d be on your level or even above it would take you with him to his lands, away from here. And that would leave our village unprotected, unshielded. I need you here, Brienne. They need you here. These are your people as they are my people. We vowed to their protection. You have to stay, and a man who is all but dust in the wind guarantees that you are not blown away by the storm. Someone below your rank guarantees that you can stay home. Such a man will ensure that you will not suffer the same destiny twice, be forced out of the place you worked so hard for to make your home. Like this, you get to stay. Till the day you die and join us in Valhalla.”

Brienne’s big blue eyes fill with tears. No matter how much she curses these people most of the time, Brienne cares deeply about them, they are the few remains of the home they had to give up on, in favor of this smaller one, the big life they had to let go of in favor of a life in small, but theirs, only theirs.

And to think that she’d have to give up on that seems perhaps even more unbearable than being wed off to that oaf.

To think that she’d leave her people unprotected tears her apart.

To think that everything they built up over the years would turn to ash again tears her apart.

To think that she could lose this home to, it tears her apart.

“This is not fair,” Brienne says, her voice shaking with emotion, finding hold only once she can feel her father’s hand enclosing hers once more.

“I know it’s not, but sometimes we don’t get to choose,” he says, his voice full with anguish, too.

“When do we ever?” she huffs sadly, feeling defeated, not by men but circumstance.

“I chose your mother.”

“But I will not get to choose my children’s father?” Brienne argues with a sad smile that is not a smile if not for her lips curling upwards. Her father grabs her hand a little tighter as he tells her, “Choose him with your heart, but actually only just to choose yourself. And of that I am certain, it will earn you a seat at the very front of Odin’s table.”

“For bearing children to a weak man?” Brienne argues.

For yielding to circumstance?

For yielding to a man who could never make her yield in duel?

“For forgetting your own wishes in favor of the people under your protection. For fighting for them with all that you have, not just battle axe and shield. You would be the shieldmaiden to this village,
Brienne. If the Allfather did not choose you to rank among the highest once you come to pass, come back to me, then he would have to be a fool. And you know that Odin knows everything. He cannot be a fool.”

Brienne bends her knees to lean her head on her father’s strong shoulder, the way she has done it so many times ever since she was a child, only ever finding security in his strength, finding a way through the storm by searching for this rock standing above any wave.

“That is not what I was foretold,” she whispers.

Brienne always counted on that hope, however faint, that there would be a man out there, strong and tall, with golden crown and the grace of a mountain lion. Because that man would have been worthy to yield to, but a weakling? Someone who would only ever eat the dust beneath her feet? That cannot be the man whom she saw so many times in the mist of her dreams.

She took solace in that, even if that man were not real, she would be a shieldmaiden, thus, that she would never be bested in fight. That she would become a tale, a story told to children huddled around the hearth, to hear of her great deeds, the woman no one could best, the warrior woman no one could win, for she won, always.

And now? Now I am supposed to yield to conventions?

She was a princess once. And now… now she is supposed to yield to someone who’d lose any fight to her? Who is no prince, no king, not even a jarl?

Brienne can feel her father pat the back of her head tentatively. “I know. And my heart pains for demanding it of you, but I will not last forever, you know it.”

“Then last a while longer,” she mutters. “Please.”

“I will last for as long as the Gods grant it to me. I will live as long as I can, for you and no one but you, but the time will come that I join your mother, that I find her by Odin’s table to ask her for one last dance.”

Brienne nods, her closed eyes still pressed to the dip of his shoulder. “I know. And I wish it for you, Father. I pray to Frigg and Thor that they will take you there, but… not just now. Not just yet.”

Selwyn presses a kiss to the side of her head with the faintest smile. “I will try, be certain of that. You don’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Is that a threat?” she laughs drily.

“A promise, my child, always a promise.”
Chapter Summary

While Brienne still struggles with her father's proposal for her future, she soon has to find out that there are far more important issues to take care of when a stranger comes to their village, a man well known for being dangerous, a man with a name known across the entire continent...

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, thanks for sticking around.

I am ever the more thankful for your comments as they give me a bit more confidence to keep going with the story.

As mentioned in the tags, Jaime is a potty mouth, so prepare yourselves for... banter of the dirty kind, LOL.

Anyway, I hope you are going to like the chapter.

Thanks and much love! ♥♥♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Brienne lets out a sigh as she continues cutting up goat meat into big chunks.

Ever since her father proposed this new plan of his, or rather of his plan of how he believes Brienne’s future to be secured, things have been a bit more strained, though he assured her on the next day that she can take her time to think it all through, that there is no such rush, but that he just didn’t want to keep it from her any longer.

Brienne was glad for it, though she has little hope that there is another way, really. The more she thought about it that night, lying on her furs, the clearer it became to Brienne – if she wants to be Jarl, she has to be Jarl in all but name. And that won’t work with someone who fancies rule. It has to be someone who’ll follow her lead.

*And Hyle may be just that sort of man.*

Not that this is any more promising to Brienne. While those were the thoughts that kept her awake at night, the moment she was off to her dreams, Brienne saw the man clad in crimson again, with a golden crown on top of his head, calling out to her, calling out her name, his love.

*And that man looked nothing like Hyle Hunt.*
For now, Brienne is simply happy to have her routines back. They help calm the storm in her heart, the way they always do, always did, ever since routines were ripped from her as storms swept her off her feet, off to new shores, new worlds, new homes.

_How does Maggy always say? Close by and far away, right? So why should I not push that a little further away – at least for now?_

Brienne cuts up the last chunk of meat, carries the knife over to the basin to wash it clean along with her hands, before proceeding outside, the bowl of fresh meat under her arm.

She whistles once, twice, and a few moments later, Sun and Moon run up to her, their paws almost not audible as they flit across the ground as gracefully as ever.

Brienne starts to toss chunks of the meat in the air, which is very much exciting for the direwolves as they jump high to catch the chunks before the other can.

“Easy now!” she scolds Sun and Moon when they start to growl at one another over one piece of meat both wanted to get first. Brienne tosses another, which solves the quarrel at once.

*If only it was as easy with people…*

“Don’t get too used to it. You are supposed to hunt yourselves,” Brienne warns them.

Sun and Moon have been taught to hunt when they were still pups. Brienne saw to that. Like she trains the youths, she taught her direwolves to be able to provide for themselves. Brienne spent endless hours, sitting on dry leaves, puddles, mud, and snow, depending on the season, to teach her wolves how to hunt anything from hare over squirrel to stag. After all, their mother was no longer there to do it for them.

It was troublesome, especially since Brienne couldn’t teach them to hunt with bow and arrow, obviously. She had to learn to hunt like an animal in order to be able to teach it to her animals how to hunt as one of their own in turn.

However, in the end, her efforts proved to be worth it. Sun and Moon can hunt anything – even people who are dumb enough to enter their territories. Needless to mention that her hunting improved as a result, too.

However, the animals of the forests have been rarer these past few months, due to the changing weather. Some went further south in search for some warmth, others were probably hunted down by people of the other clans close by – because they don’t know how to manage resources properly.

*Which is little wonder, because these fools don’t even know how to grow rye! They still think that raids alone will get them through winter, the fools!*

Thus, when times are tougher for Sun and Moon to find something to eat, Brienne will feed them an extra portion of meat so not to have them starve. She can’t have her fosterlings suffer hunger, can she?

Brienne tosses the remaining chunks at them, watching with amusement as Sun and Moon jump high in the air as though they were _Skoll_ and _Hati_ from the old tales, chasing around the world to consume sun and moon as the world of the Gods falters.

Once they devoured all meat, the two direwolves run up to her to lick her bloodied hands clean.

“You know that this means that you owe me an animal of the size of the goat. So you better hunt one
for me once spring returns, hm?” Brienne says with a smile, stroking over the sides of their faces, either one leaning into the touch.

They have been more alert these past few days, or so the young woman noted, and Brienne wonders if the wolves are simply sensing her own unsettledness thanks to her father’s new plans, or if they sense an enemy coming.

*Or maybe they are just having a mood. Sun is prone to that!*

“That’s it,” she announces, which has the direwolves whine in turn.

“No complaining. That is more than enough. Or else you’ll turn lazy. And once you become lazy, you will turn fat. And we can’t have that, can we? Now, off you go,” she urges the wolves. Sun and Moon share a look before resuming their spot on their favorite ledge.

“See, that’s what I am talking about. Do I have to take you hunting again after you unlearned it?”

The direwolves lean their heads down, acting as though they are asleep. Brienne laughs. Sometimes they act more humanly than they should be able to.

“Ungrateful wretches you are!” she calls after them, though the wolves don’t do much besides wriggling their ears at the familiar sound of her voice. Brienne shakes her head as she walks back inside to wash her hands and the bowl clean of the blood and slobber. She towels her hands when her father limps inside.

“There you are! Where have you been for so long?” Brienne asks, pulling back a stool at once for him to sit upon. “You know you shouldn’t walk around that much with your bad leg.”

He winces as he sits down to ease his limbs. “Daughter, you know I love you, but you have to stop that at once. I am no old man. I have an injured leg, alright, but that doesn’t mean I can’t do anything by myself anymore.”

“Then what did you do?” she demands to know.

“I went to see after the horses.”

“I told you…” Brienne means to lecture him, but her father is having none of it. “Save it. It went without any trouble.”

“You limp more than you did in the morning,” Brienne grumbles, to which her father only rolls his eyes at her. “I have to get out every once in a while.”

“Which is when you are supposed to tell me so that I can help you walk outside. I offered you often enough to walk with you.”

“I don’t want to walk or take a stroll like old Maggy does, I want to do something useful,” he pouts.

And Brienne knows that her father needs it. She understands that better than most. Brienne loathes it with a burning passion not to be able to go about her usual tasks and training if she ends up injured after a fight or when the youths prove to have an even poorer aim than they do anyway and manage to strike her hard to confine her to the bed for a few days.

Her father was always known and respected for his fighting prowess. Selwyn Tarth is about as much of a great warrior as he is a great jarl and an even greater man. Thus, to him, being bound to the house, having to leave a lot of the tasks he’d normally want to do by himself to provide for his
people to Brienne instead is hard for him. She knows that.

*But that doesn’t mean he gets to ruin his leg!* Brienne thinks to herself. *Not after I was responsible for it getting that bad in the first place…*

“You are Jarl,” she argues.

“Do not fight me on this, daughter.”


“And I appreciate it, but you are overdoing it,” Selwyn argues, rubbing his aching thigh a few times to ease out some of the pain.

“And where did I get that from, you tell me?” Brienne snorts as a small smile spreads over her face.

Selwyn laughs at that, leaning back in his chair. “Way too often I have the feeling I am arguing with your mother, not with you.”

Brienne opens her mouth in reply, but that is when she can hear strange noises from the village, reaching all the way up to their house.

“What is that ruckus about?” Brienne asks, glancing out the window as there is movement by the town. The whole village seems to be in an uproar, which is rare enough because normally, nothing much happens – ever.

“I don’t know,” her father replies, worry written across his features at once. Brienne walks over to the open door to glance outside, leaning against the wooden frame slightly. “They are moving up the mount now.”

Her father grimaces. “I hope the youths didn’t do anything foolish again.”

“When don’t they?” she huffs.

“True again,” Selwyn sighs as he stands up. Brienne opens her mouth to say something.

“Not a word about my leg now,” he warns her.

“I didn’t say anything,” she says in a sing-song.

“Good.”

He walks out to the front outside their house, putting most of his weight on his good leg, standing as tall as possible, as befits a jarl. Brienne takes her stance beside him, fingers wrapped around her battle axe resting by her hip. She tilts her head at the sound of hooting and singing, shouting and yelling.

“Did they go boar hunting again?” Selwyn asks, squinting his eyes to see just what they seem to have caught without permit. “How often do I have to tell them that they are not supposed to go there? The villagers further up North are anything but friendly to those who come to hunt in their territories.”

“The last time someone hunted in their woods, they sent the villagers from across our fjord his head back, impaled on a spear. I dare hope that this taught them *some* lesson,” Brienne says, sucking the inside of her cheek into her mouth. “Though one can never know.”
Selwyn shakes his head, drawing a shaky breath. “And all that short before the althing. That will not help convince the other jarls to strengthen the peace amongst us most certainly.”

“They better have a good reason,” Brienne grumbles. “Or else I will have my girls chase them through town to teach them a lesson about breaking the rules.”

At last, the group of young men makes it up the mount. Brienne looks at familiar faces, coated in mud, some with cuts, some bruised, some not.

Garth, whose aim is as poor as his teeth, Halvar, whose appetite is greater than his might as a warrior, and Vidar, who has the mouth of a hero, but did not yet commit any heroic deeds. They tend to make trouble around the village every now and then, because they are hotspurs eager to earn their stripes, since they have only ever seen small battles, wishing for raids Brienne’s father won’t allow, bearing in his heart the painful memories that should make anyone realize the futility of those pillages altogether.

*They only seek war because they haven’t seen it yet,* Brienne thinks to herself, though her attention soon leaves the youths, and instead focuses on the one face she cannot put.

That man is none of their own.

“Jarl Selwyn! We have a gift for you!” Vidar calls out in a dramatic voice. “See what we found roaming around our borders!”

“Was like ripe fruit ready to be picked, Jarl Selwyn!” Halvar adds, laughing loudly, which makes his rounded stomach move up and down. “There was no way for us to resist!”

Garth gives the stranger wrapped in chains a shove forward. The man rewards him with a laugh, only for Vidar to club him in the knees to make him kneel down in the mud.

“You know I like it rough, but not *that* rough!” the stranger hoots, doing well to conceal the pain Brienne can see cut across his features anyway.

“Jarl Selwyn, accept this gift – the Kingslayer!” Vidar repeats, his voice, if possible, even more dramatic than last time, and Brienne resists any urge to tell that youngling that he is repeating himself.

“The Kingslayer?!” Brienne gapes, her mouth standing wide open once the information sets in. Her eyes tear back down to the man kneeling in the mud, over with cuts and blood, over with dirt, hair unkempt, clothes hanging down his lean frame in rags.

*The Kingslayer.*

He, who killed the last King by shoving a sword through his back.

*A man without honor.*

But also son to Jarl Tywin, sailing underneath the Lannister Lion for a banner, one of the strongest Jarls the lands have ever seen, and likely will ever see.

*This means no good.*

“Pleased to meet you,” the Kingslayer huffs, licking his bloodied lips.

“What folly is this?” Brienne’s father calls out, voicing her thought exactly.

“We overpowered him and his men as they spied on us, Jarl,” Garth tells him.
“We weren’t *spying* on you, you dumb *veslingr,*” Jaime snarls over his shoulder. “You take yourselves by far too seriously. Why would we spy on *you* of all clans open to our choice?”

Brienne knows that he will get hit in the back of the head by Garth standing behind him before the Kingslayer can say only just a word. His face collides with the mud with a smacking sound.

*He had that coming.*

The young men hoot and gesture victoriously. Brienne rolls her eyes.

*They still have so much to learn.*

“Straighten him back up. He shall say what he and his men wanted here!” Selwyn orders, his voice cutting through the hollering with the sharpness of a Valyrian blade, the steel long since forgotten, long since gone.

Garth grumbles as he pulls Jaime back up by his hair, as roughly as he can. The Kingslayer spits a few times, to get rid of some of the mud coating his tongue, before he goes on to say, “Pleased to hear that at least the Jarl seems to be a man of reason. I appreciate that about you already."

“I don’t care for what you may think of me, Kingslayer,” Brienne’s father says with resolution. “My one concern is to know what brought you here to us.”

“We were in search for something,” Jaime replies, rolling his shoulders with nonchalance.

*In such a situation – nonchalance!*

“You trespassed our territories,” Selwyn argues.

“I am aware, but I was given the orders, which are mine to carry out. As Jaime *Tywinson,* I have to do as the Father commands, no?” the Kingslayer replies with a kind of ease in his smile that has Brienne shudder.

“So your father ordered you here?” Selwyn wants to know, but Jaime doesn’t want to share much of anything, and only replies instead, “He ordered me to find something for him in this area, and we were in good faith to find it somewhere around here.”

“What did you try to find?” Brienne’s father questions.

“That is none of your concern,” the stranger man hisses, only to earn himself another jab with the club by Vidar, who only feels confident because the Kingslayer is in chains, Brienne is sure. “Do not speak disrespectfully to a jarl.”

Jaime narrows his eyes at the young man, his green orbs only narrow slits this time, “And you would do better not to anger the lion. Even less so the lion whose father would rip you to shreds if he were to know how you treat his kin.”

“We’ve had any right to take you. The old rules command it,” Vidar objects.

“What was I supposed to do? Come here and formally ask for allowance?” Jaime huffs.

“Perhaps?” Vidar replies, rolling his shoulders. Jaime laughs drily at that.

“Then I might just as well have handled myself over to you to serve as a *thrall* or man whore,” Jaime argues, only to tear his gaze around to Brienne, a small smile spreading across his mud-coated lips. “Looking at that prim one over there, you seem to be low on men to satisfy the needs anyway, if *that*
“Club him!” Selwyn calls out, and his men follow suit. “You do not speak that lowly of my daughter.”

After a few more hits, Selwyn gestures at them to stop, which Garth, Vidar, and Halvar do at once. Jaime slowly straightens himself back up, offering another faux smile meant to conceal his pain, which Brienne can see already by the way his body bends and curls out of shape. “Daughter?! And here I thought that was a beast you tamed, put in a dress, and taught how to speak!”

Brienne is down the steps faster than he can even take notice of her movements. The Kingslayer blinks as he feels the sharp edge of her battle axe biting into his exposed throat, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down as he swallows thickly. “The next word you speak better not be another insult, Kingslayer,” she snarls, but Jaime remains unimpressed, and only ever rewards her with a smile. “Or what? Will you kill me? Because if you think I fear death, you are mistaken. I mean, I cannot hinder you, I believe, but that would mean the death to your clan, woman. The lions will come marching, hungry for your men’s blood. And they will only stop once you are annihilated, I am afraid.”

Brienne releases him at once, but in the motion, smacks him across the back of the head hard enough to make Jaime’s chin hit against his chest. “Ow!” the Kingslayer whines.

“My hand slipped, my apologies,” Brienne says, her face expressionless, rolling her wrist in his direction as she turns her back on him. “Do go on, Slayer.”

She resumes her position by her father’s side. “What of his men?” Selwyn asks, turning to the young men who brought him.

“When we found him, there were three more. When we encircled them to ask them what they were doing here, they started to attack,” Garth reports.

“And so you killed them,” Jaime adds.

“They’ve asked for it,” Garth retorts.

“Oh, make no mistake. I have no love to give for any of them. They were only ever sent along because Jarl Tywin paid them well,” Jaime tells him, which has Brienne ever the more convinced that he is all that his soiled name holds. Those men were under his protection, and this is how he thinks of them?

“Why only so few men?” Selwyn wants to know.

“We came across the sea. Our ship got caught in a storm, killing most of my men. We landed further down South, somewhere by Snakewood. The few men who remained, including myself, meant to carry on with our task and thus headed further up North to where we were meant to go,” the Kingslayer explains.

“And steal a ship to take back home?” Brienne adds, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Preferably,” Jaime replies with an easy smile and a roll of his shoulders. “Though I’d assume we
would have left it somewhere to travel inland back to the Rock at some point.”

“I see,” she huffs.

_That fits about just right, the Kingslayer, stealing ships, without honor, without any idea what that word even means._

“That is what our people do, so don’t act as though you wouldn’t have done the same thing,” Jaime retorts. “Well, in any case, a few more died of sickness, leaving only us four, well… and only me now. Because there’s only ever me, as it appears.”

“What were you searching?” Selwyn asks again.

“I will not answer it,” is the only reply the Jarl receives, however.

“If you wanted to steal something from our lands, then it is my good right to know what you wanted to steal of my people and me,” Brienne’s father reminds him. Jaime nods his head slowly. “I didn’t mean to steal anything from your little village. It was the lands beyond this fisher village that I was out for.”

“And those are my lands, too,” Selwyn argues.

That seems to get Jaime by surprise as he cranes his neck, tilting his head to the side. “Since when?”

“Since no one laid claims to them, and so we did,” Brienne huffs.

“Huh, well, no one told us about that during the last _althing_,” Jaime snorts. “You may want to mention that the next time round.”

“We found a way to grow crops there,” Brienne goes on to say.

_Really? Small wonder that, compared to most, you have perhaps even too much flesh on the bones,_” he laughs. “Look at you! They grow giants here! Just what do you give her to eat to look like that?”

Brienne turns her head towards Selwyn. “Father?”

“You will _not_ kill him,” he tells her. Brienne sighs. Jaime laughs. And she _hates_ him for it.

“As I said, Jarl Selwyn, I appreciate that you are one of the few who has his wits together in this mad world. You do know that it’d mean war to kill Jarl Tywin’s son and heir,” Jaime goes on, talking as boldly as a man would who just overpowered a clan, and didn’t just end up being captured by a village’s youths.

“I do not need your praise, Kingslayer, for it means nothing to be called smart and brave by a backstabber. A man without honor should know to hold his tongue in front of those who have it.”

“Oh, most certainly. Apologies, _honorable_ Jarl Selwyn,” Jaime chuckles.

“What do we do about him, Jarl?” Vidar demands to know.

“We could cook him! I never tasted mountain lion before! Ha!” Halvar shouts, tapping his palms against his belly as though it was a drum.

“Oh, I wouldn’t do that if I were you, piggy. Lion meat is too hard to chew for you, I fear,” Jaime warns him with a feral kind of grin.
“We could sacrifice him to the Gods!” Vidar suggests, seemingly quite pleased with the idea, and Garth instantly agrees to the plan, “I like that! He’d make a good sacrifice for sure. It’d certainly bring us victory in our next fight, Jarl.”

That is when Brienne’s father steps in, his voice loud and leaving no doubt about the fact that he made up his mind, and that the others are to follow his command, “We are not sacrificing the son of Tywin Tytossen, don’t make yourself ridiculous.”

“But what are we supposed to do with him, Father?” Brienne asks softly.

The Kingslayer is a dangerous hostage to keep, and an even more dangerous guest to host. He is despised by many for his act of treason, which is why some many men would like to sink their axes into his flesh to see what Kingslayers are made of. At the same time, this is Jarl Tywin’s son and heir, as he said. And the Jarl of the Rock will likely not hesitate to declare war on a small village like theirs, if only to see his son walk free at once.

This is surely big trouble, the kind of trouble we don’t need – at all.

Just this morning, Brienne had to battle the possibilities of marriage and being Jarl in all but name, and now they have to deal with the Kingslayer! As though there wasn’t enough of a storm raging within her world already.

*The Gods must be testing me.*

“I don’t know,” Selwyn sighs, which the Kingslayer seems to take as an invitation to speak up again, “I know! Just undo my chains and let me go.”

“I will do no such thing,” the Jarl speaks.

“Why not?” Jaime demands to know.

“Because I wouldn’t know what you’d tell your father about us, and if you didn’t use that chance to attack us, now having found a reason,” Selwyn tells him. “Jarl Tywin does not need much reason to strike an attack, I know that much. And if we give you leave, I have no sure way to know just what you would tell him about us.”

“Oh, you’d have my word of honor for it, Jarl,” Jaime argues, batting his mud-crusted eyelashes at the older man. “I’d sing in the highest voice of the greatest praise for you and your little village!”

“There is no honor in you,” Brienne snarls.

That he even dares to speak of it…

“True again,” Jaime snickers. “But you’d still have my word for it, Jarl.”

Selwyn runs his fingers through his beard as he contemplates. “If we wind up with the Kingslayer by their village, Tywin will have us executed, I am sure. If we keep him for too long, he will send for him. If we let him go, we only give rise for them to attack us.”

“I have a suggestion to make, if you don’t mind?” Jaime calls out once more – and yet again without having been asked.

“I mind,” Brienne snaps.

“Daughter.”
She turns to her father. “What? You don’t sincerely consider taking advice from the Kingslayer, are you?”

“I will hear his side,” her father argues, rolling his shoulders at her. “It can’t harm.”

Brienne grumbles, puckering her lips.

“Speak, Kingslayer, before I change my mind,” Selwyn urges Jaime, who is already busy laughing at Brienne’s reaction. However, his voice and mimic are back to sincerity the moment he opens his mouth, changing as fast as the sea. “The *althing* is not far away. I assume just one or two more moons, right?”

“Two moons. Yes.”

“Keep me until you travel to the *althing*, and then take me with you. My father will be there without his great army, which means that you will not have to fear to be struck down at once. I was supposed to return around that time, or else, Father would start sending after me, so the opportunity couldn’t be any more perfect! At the *althing*, you have best chances to arrange that peacefully, Jarl. And I would be happy to say that you took me in, if only to keep the peace. Father may even reward you for the safe return of his precious heir, imagine that!”

Brienne snorts at that. “What interest do you have in keeping the peace?”

“One could say that this is the only thing that ever drove me,” Jaime tells her, his voice dark, sincere, and so much in contrast to his fake smiles and cutting comments.

“Is that so?” she huffs, cocking an eyebrow at the man.

“That is so, yes,” he snaps, now seemingly offended in all earnest, which has Brienne wondering what would get him angry about that of all sources of frustration available to him.

“I think he’s lying,” Brienne tells her father.

“Why would I?” Jaime argues.

“Why would you speak the truth in the first place?” she retorts.

“Because people aren’t born liars naturally?!”

“They seem to be in your clan.”

“Careful now, woman!” the Kingslayer hisses, gritting his teeth.

However, that is when her father interferes, “Both of you, stop.”

Brienne sucks the inside of her cheek into her mouth, whereas Jaime wrinkles his nose. Thus, Selwyn goes on to declare, “I have made up my mind. You will remain prisoner here until the *althing* takes place, Kingslayer. As you said, I will take you with us, to return you to your kin. For that, you will leave us at peace – and you will guarantee that your father will not attack us in turn.”

“Splendid!” Jaime laughs, flashing a bright smile at Brienne’s father. “Then, how about you unwrap my chains? Now that I am your guest?”

The jarl shakes his head, laughing, which does seem to catch even someone like Jaime off-guard for a moment. “Oh, you are not to be treated as a guest. You are *prisoner* to my clan because the rules command that you may not trespass our lands without permit. If you do, it’s seen as an act of war,
which would make your killing justified by the old laws. Since I do not wish to take your life, you will have to answer for your crimes in some way, so to spend some time as prisoner seems sufficient enough."

“You wound me, Jarl Selwyn,” the Kingslayer laments. “And here I thought we were friends already!”

“You will be prisoner at my home, which you should see serves the purpose to know you protected. Your clan has killed many of my men and shieldmaidens over the years,” Brienne’s father goes on to say.

“Same for you,” Jaime huffs.

“I mean to say that the rest of the village will not be as benevolent as I am.”
Jaime makes a clicking sound with his tongue. “I assume you have a point there.”

“And my daughter will be your prison guard,” Selwyn goes on.

Brienne snaps her head around to him, eyes opened wide. “I what?!”

“Hahaha!” Jaime laughs mischievously.

“Shut your mouth!” she snaps.

“I cannot trust anyone with him,” Selwyn mutters to her.

“And you’d trust me with him? I want his head on a stick,” Brienne argues.

“I trust you because you are the only one I trust in this world. And so you will do it.”

“Fine,” she grumbles, puckering her lips, her mind racing through the options of how to kill him, if only she could.

“Then it is decided,” Selwyn declares, before turning his attention back to the youths. “The rest of you, go back to the village now.”

“Don't we get a reward, Jarl?” Vidar asks.

“You can count yourselves lucky that I don’t have you chased through the streets naked for causing that uproar,” Selwyn tells them. The three grimace in irritation and growing shame.

_They still have so, so much to learn._

“This was no act of bravery, but foolery foremost. The next time you see about our borders, you’d do better getting my allowance first.”

“Aye,” the three say in unison.

“Halvar, you will go with me to the seer. I need a consultation with the Gods at once,” Selwyn orders. The young man walks up the steps at once to offer his arm to the Jarl to help him steady him down the steps, which makes Brienne a bit proud in private, because her father listens to her after all. However, most of that joy is overshadowed by the new duty he bequeathed her with.

“You just leave me with him?” Brienne asks once it dawns on her.
“As I said, I entrust him into your care,” Selwyn says, rolling his wrist at her.

“But…,” Brienne stammers.

“Ha! Serves you right,” Jaime hoots.

“Hit him if he behaves too badly,” Selwyn calls over his shoulder as he starts to walk away with Halvar.

Brienne nods, and wastes no time to smack the Kingslayer across the head with all of her might once, which has Jaime cry out in pain.

“Serves you right,” she snarls.

“I suppose I had that one coming,” Jaime mutters, moving his head to somehow relieve himself of the ache.

“Oh, you most definitely did.”

“I will see you later,” her father shouts, seemingly taking his private pleasure in loading that task upon her shoulders now, likely for her calling him out on his injury earlier.

_He shall be damned._

Brienne shakes her head as her father makes his way down to the village along with Halvar, Garth, and Vidar, leaving only her – and the Kingslayer, her new prisoner.

“So? What are we supposed to do now?” Jaime asks, tilting his head to the side, feigning childish curiosity. “Any ideas?”

“You are not supposed to do anything but shut your mouth,” she snaps.

“That doesn’t sound very interesting. Now, I have an idea!” he shouts almost gleefully. “Undo my chains. I would reward you greatly for your services. How does that sound, hm?”

“There is not enough gold in the world to make me consider that for only just a second,” Brienne retorts.

What is he thinking?

Or not thinking?

“Oh, I have no more gold on me than my arm ring, but I could show you what it’s like to be a true woman to reward you for your services,” Jaime says with a wicked grin. “Give me a few minutes to get your cunt good and wet so I can thrust into you without relent or abandon. I will have you scream like a sow as I take you, whichever way you preferred. That’d be up to you. And after that, we both would go our separate ways. It’s a profitable deal to both sides.”

Brienne smacks Jaime hard enough to make him fall back into the dirt. He moans as he leans his head on the side, which is caked with mud. The Kingslayer rolls back on his shoulder, spitting out dirt as he straightens himself back up to lean on his knees.

“You have a mean hook, I will give you that. Though that just tells me that, deep down, you want it, as much as you resist. And I may tell you, I am _really_ good at this, so I would definitely make it worth the bargain, sweetling.”

“I don’t care for what whores or thralls you may have dishonored, but be sure that I would rather eat rotten fish until my last day than let you anywhere near me,” Brienne points out to him, wondering to herself why she even bothers to correct him. It’d be best if she simply ignored him.

“You only say that because you haven’t tried it yet,” Jaime chimes. “I bet you pushed the boys away whenever they tried to get what lies underneath your skirt.”

“What tells you that I am not wed?” Brienne argues, cocking an eyebrow at him.

“You don’t look like it?” he replies, wrinkling his nose, to which Brienne rolls her big blue eyes. So he goes on to add, “I mean, you are ugly, and most men seem scared of beasts like you, naturally.”

“And you are not afraid?” she huffs.

“Oh, I induce fear, woman, I don’t feel it. To me, you’d be a conquest at best, but no threat, really. For that, you’d have to stand a chance against me in a fight,” Jaime laughs. “Which you do not and won’t ever.”

Brienne narrows her eyes at him. “I would best you any time.”

“Oh, would you? Then unwrap my chains and prove it,” he taunts her.

Brienne blows out air through her nostrils. “If you think that I am that stupid, you are mistaken.”

“You look rather dull after all. It can’t harm to try,” he chimes.

Brienne shakes her head as she bends down to take the rope to which his collar is attached. “Come on now, up you go.”

“You are bossy,” Jaime grumbles as he scrambles to his feet, coming to stand a bit unsteadily, though he tries his best to appear otherwise. “And to where would we go anyway?”

“The stables.”

“Why is that?” he asks.

“I don’t let you anywhere near my hearth like that,” she says, nodding down his lean, muddy, bloody frame.

“Don’t you have a washing room or a bath house?” Jaime asks with a grimace. Brienne just pulls him forward back into the mud once, for emphasis.

“One of these days, I will kill you,” he grumbles as he scrambles back to his feet another time. “I promise you that, woman.”

“Not if I kill you first,” Brienne replies in a sing-song. Once the Kingslayer stands again, the young woman starts to drag him across the mud, making sure to give the leash a tug every now and then to leave Jaime Lannister under no illusion that he is in any way in charge, no matter his laments and jests.

She opens the shed’s door to lead him inside, though Brienne doesn’t like it at all to have an invader now in her own home. She won’t let the youths in, and now a complete stranger, the Kingslayer no less. This must be madness.

“This is sincerely where you bathe?” Jaime asks, making a face. Brienne rolls her eyes at him. “No, but this is where we bathe and shear our animals, or skin them for the meat.”
“That is how you treat Jaime Tywinson?”

“That is how I treat my prisoner.”

Jaime watches as Brienne takes a hold of an iron ring hanging from the ceiling to loop the leash through, making a tight knot to leave him only enough room to sit on the ground.

“What now?” he asks in a demanding tone.

“Undress,” Brienne replies simply, which earns her another ridiculous smile from the Kingslayer. “Oh, so you want to return to my offer after all? I knew you couldn’t resist me for long.”

“Oh, I can very well resist,” Brienne huffs.

“Then what makes you blush so much, hm?” he argues.

“Undress,” Brienne repeats, though she can feel heat rise to her cheeks after all.

It must be her anger, though.

**Most certainly the anger.**

“You will have to unwrap my chains, though,” Jaime points out to her with a gleeful smile. “You see, with my hands bound, I can’t seem to do it!”

He wriggles his chained wrists at her for emphasis. Brienne growls to herself as she loops the rope attaching to the metal links wrapped around his wrists through the ring as well.

“You won’t get off the clothes like that. I have sleeves,” he lectures her as though she was entirely dumb.

“You don’t say?” Brienne huffs as she steps closer, unhooking her axe from her belt, pleased to see him jump for a second.

*While he is very good at hiding his true self from the world, fear tends to expose even the best actor’s masquerade.*

“Your father ordered you not to kill me, remember?” Jaime tells her, his voice a bit higher than he’d probably want it to be, giving away the game that he is indeed feeling a bit unsettled by her approaching him with the axe.

“I am not killing you,” Brienne snorts as she starts to cut through the laces on his chest with a quick tug, though she reckons the tunic is not really a loss, as it only hangs down his body like tatters barely holding together. “I am merely helping you undress.”

“Hey, careful! I don’t need more scratches,” he grumbles, to which Brienne can only huff, “A man afraid of scars? What kind of a warrior are you?”

“I just don’t trust a woman with the hands of a bear with cutting cloth from my body. I do want to survive that bath, if you don’t mind,” Jaime retorts.

“Well, then you better stop moving around,” Brienne says as she continues, her moves certain and fast as she cuts away the tattered tunic, piece by piece.

“Hey, I liked that tunic,” he pouts.
“It was all tatters and shreds even before I began,” Brienne argues with nonchalance. “I will give you something new to wear from my father once we are done. Though I suppose they might be a bit too big on you.”

“I am about as tall as he is! I mean, I don’t compare to you giantess in height, but you are no measure anyway,” Jaime snorts.

“But you are not nearly as great as he is, and won’t ever be,” Brienne says as she starts to cut open the sleeves to make them fall off his arms, revealing underneath it slightly dirtied skin covering toned muscles, flexing and unflexing as they are exposed to the cold air. Brienne can spot many scars running up and down his body, looking almost like a piece of art, speaking of a great fighter’s earnings despite his title being one of a weakling, craven, a backstabber betraying the old rules of giving a man a proper death.

The Kingslayer.

Jaime seems to realize at once that her attention remains too long and his artfully tattooed torso, so he says with a dark grin, “You seem to like what you see. You can touch it, if you liked?”

“I think I will pass,” Brienne says, though her eyes remain on his toned abs for too long yet again.

“You say so now. I do wonder what you will have to say about that once you have to work on my breeches. I bet that is the first time you come that close to a man’s cock,” he chuckles wickedly.

“You will undo your breeches yourself,” Brienne tells him with a sarcastic grin on her chapped lips.

“But sweetling! How would I, in the position you put me into?” he croons.

Brienne steps away again to unloop the rope attached to his wrists. “You have two hands, your fingers are free to move, your legs are not bound, so you can do that on your own.”

“But what if I asked you to do it for me? Nicely, even? Maybe that’d give you some inspiration,” he suggests. “The way your fingers keep twitching, I am very much convinced that you want to touch me there, get a feel for what you actually want to feel thrusting deep inside you.”

“I can also start testing my axe on you,” Brienne argues, flashing the weapon at him.

“Your father said…,” he means to lecture her, but Brienne cuts him off, “No one can tell what scratches are from when and what weapon exactly. And you wouldn’t want to admit to having earned all those scars from that mannish woman here, would you?”

Brienne is a bit surprised when Jaime pulls down his breeches in one swift move, kicking off his boots next, way too sure about himself in her opinion, especially because Jaime keeps his wrists slightly raised for the sole purpose of being sure that Brienne is bound to see his manhood.

Which is admittedly larger than I thought, the young woman thinks to herself, but then scolds herself in the same instance for even letting that travel through her mind.

“So? Changed your mind?” Jaime keeps teasing. “If it’s the pain of the first time that you fear, I can be very gentle. Or rough and fast so that the initial hurt can ebb into pleasure and your squeals of joy and hunger for my cock. Whichever you prefer.”

He nods over to the wooden trestle behind them. “Bend over that thing and lift your skirts for me, and I’ll take you from behind if that is how you like it best, afraid of losing your maidenhead. You only have to untie me so that I can guide your thick hips onto my cock.”
Brienne keeps her expression as blank as possible as she takes the leash a little tighter.

“C’mon, you can’t say you are not thinking about it. How it’d feel like to be a woman, how it’d be like to feel filled by me – after you took a good look at what could be yours to enjoy.”

“You honestly think I’d let myself be defiled by the Kingslayer, even more so before I wed?” Brienne points out to him, keeping her voice as leveled as she can, though she can’t help the blush stealing up her face.

She is used to men making comments of that sort, but not to that extent, really.

“I can bed and wed you if that gives you more confidence. I am likely the best match you’d ever get… I suppose I am the best anyone can get, granted my family name and my looks,” he laughs.

“Then I’d rather impale myself on a spear,” Brienne huffs, unamused. “Now, into the bucket.”

“Impale yourself on a spear? What a waste if you can impale yourself on my shaft!” he croons.

“Into the bucket,” Brienne growls, giving him a shove. Jaime stumbles into the small tub.

“Tough love,” he grumbles, puckering his lips.

Brienne knocks against Jaime’s shoulders to make him sit down, which gladly covers the manhood that almost stared at Brienne as he stood before her.

Jaime stretches out his legs as far as the tub allows for it. “I mean, it’s a little cramped, but I suppose we will both fit if you move in very closely.”

“You get to keep it all to yourself, no worries,” Brienne tells him with a fake smile. “So the space should suffice plentifully for you and your ego.”

Brienne turns away slightly as Jaime calls after her, “Will you at least undress so that I don’t feel so exposed?”

She scowls. “And here I thought I am too ugly for you to even bear with me naked!”

“Oh, you are ugly most certainly, but that doesn’t mean that there isn’t something to appreciate about. At the least, you happen to have a cunt, which is something oh so sweet on any woman, no matter her looks,” Jaime says with a dirty grin, leaning back in the tub as much as his constraints allow for it. “And if you took the offer, I could show you just how sweet that spot is even on someone as salty and bitter as you. I am sure I can milk some of that honey even from your stubborn, mannish body, within mere moments – and let you have a taste of yourself.”

Brienne knocks against his head from behind before she hooks the other rope through the ring again, making sure to keep his arms dangling above his head.

“Seriously?” he huffs.

“I am just not taking any chances,” Brienne tells him.

“Aw, so you are afraid of the lion after all,” Jaime chuckles. “How sweet.”

Brienne shakes her head. “You are not nearly as threatening as you think you are.”

“Really?” he snorts, wrinkling his nose.
“You are too uninteresting to be threatening,” she says, rolling her broad shoulders.

“People fear me all across the lands,” he argues.

Brienne sighs, “I don’t.”

“You just say so,” Jaime huffs, adding quieter, “Everyone does.”

“You are my prisoner. I don’t fear prisoners.”

“I am only for now. If we were to meet on the battlefield, I would crack your dour head into two with my sword and watch the blood and brains spill out of your open skull,” Jaime snarls.

Brienne cocks an eyebrow at him. “Not if I get you first by throwing my axe.”

“I would dodge,” he retorts.

“Only to fall victim to my dagger.”

Jaime opens his mouth for another jape to escape his lips, but that is when he lets out a cry of shock as Brienne downs a large bucket of cold water on him, which she grabbed when the Kingslayer could not see it.

That may help cool him and his ego down to make it fit into the bucket after all.

“By Odin’s beard! Have you lost your wits, woman?!” Jaime cries out shrilly, struggling against his chains, body wrecking thanks to the cold water still dribbling down his lean frame.


“I think my cock just shrunk by an inch thanks to that molten ice block you just downed on me,” Jaime grumbles, teeth clanking as he tries to somehow struggle back up to have least contact with the water threatening to kill him.

“You just need to toughen up,” she tells him.

“You need to warm it up.”

Brienne rolls her eyes. “I wash with just that water, too. And are you to tell me that a woman can withstand the cold better than you, Kingslayer?”

“For that you are a jarl’s daughter, you live no better life than that of a peasant,” Jaime grumbles. “I think you made a bad deal at some point if that is the best you can get for yourself.”

“I don’t need a fancy great hall,” Brienne tells him. “And in contrast to you, I can provide for myself.”

“I can provide for myself just fine,” Jaime retorts.

Brienne snorts at that. She has seen the likes of him roaming at the althings, good for nothing, sons to jarls far greater than their sons, and yet the lads and men acted as though it was their renown they showed around as they waddled after their fathers. And she can’t imagine that it’s much different with this son of a jarl, who can’t even seem to bother to show up to an althing, even though that would be his duty if he had any intention to also become a jarl one of these days.

“Tells me the man who got caught by our youths, is now prisoner to a lesser jarl’s daughter, and
can’t seem to handle cold water,” Brienne huffs, bending behind him to scrub him – as roughly as possible.

“Careful! You will scrub the skin off,” he grumbles.

“That is what the Boltons do,” Brienne argues. “Oh well, they cut it off, but I suppose it’s to the same effect. And we are not the Boltons, so I won’t scrub your skin off, no worries.”

“Don’t remind me of those wicked men. They sought alliance with my father way too many times, believing that my Tywin Lannister would give them part of the Northern regions if he were to win them in a raid,” Jaime grumbles. “But they are fools to believe that Tywin Lannister would side with them for something like that. The Jarl of the Rock has more important business than their follies with the rest of the Northerners.”

“All the same,” Brienne says, shrugging her shoulders. “It makes no difference to me. We are not at odds with the Northerners and they are not at odds with us.”

“For that you are too unimportant anyway,” the Kingslayer scoffs.

Brienne rolls her eyes. “And we consider that a fortune.”

_Not in the beginning, but now we do._

A great title comes with danger, its echoes reach further than most will anticipate. Because everyone wants that title, wants the fame attached to it. Where there is something in plenty, where there is more than the normal, people will come seek it.

With weapons if they must.

With ships if they have them.

With setting the sea ablaze in endless green if it pleases them.


“We care about providing for our people foremost. Something that a lot of jarls seem to forget,” Brienne says, continuing her ministration to get the mud off of him, though that grime seems to bear every ounce that he’s gained over his voyage ever since reaching solid land.

“You are not telling me anything new,” Jaime huffs.

“Oh, so you don’t chase fame once you are to inherit your father’s honors and lands?” Brienne snorts.

_Because that is what they all want, and can have with ease. Whereas people like me have to battle with the Gods, have to battle with ourselves, to somehow convince ourselves that marrying an oaf may be the way to be a jarl._

“I try my best not to take after my father, at least on the things that matter,” Jaime says, his voice quieter now. “I don’t see him as a man of particularly… pure character.”

“And the others?” Brienne questions, scrubbing over his muscular back, _roughly._

“You can hardly argue that he knows how to keep his men under control,” Jaime answers.

“Like the Mountain that Rides?” Brienne retorts.
She’s heard those horrific stories, too.

“As I said, there are some things I would rather do differently, if I were Jarl,” the Kingslayer tells her, looking over his shoulder, back at her, with an expression Brienne doesn’t know how to read. Is he telling her lies, is it just another jape, or is he actually speaking the truth? She doesn’t know. How would she tell?

“Head forward,” Brienne orders. When Jaime doesn’t move, she shoves his head back around to face towards the front.

“You know, you could also treat your prisoner… well.”

Brienne shakes her head. “I treat you better than I would a normal prisoner.”

“Oh, really?” he huffs.

“We normally don’t take prisoners, but instead kill them to sacrifice to Frigg. So yes, that is as well as the treatment gets,” Brienne points out to him.

“I feel so honored now,” Jaime replies, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

“As you should,” Brienne tells him. “It’s likely one of the few honors you’ll ever know.”

“You give way too much on that, let me tell you,” he scolds her.

“That is easy to say for a man without honor,” Brienne replies.

“How are you to judge about the honor I have or don’t have?” he demands to know, yet again, suddenly sounding very offended for reasons beyond her.

“You are the Kingslayer,” she says simply.

“And that brought me dishonor?”

“The way you did it brought you dishonor,” Brienne answers. “And the way you act just now.”

“Because I keep insulting you? Oh please,” he huffs, moving as much as the constraints permit him to. “Needless to mention that I think I am very much forthcoming. I offer my services to you, but you keep denying them. Now, where is the honor in that?”

“You wouldn’t know what honor is even if it bit you in the ass.”

“Honor is a horse, my horse, and he’s never once bit me in the ass,” he retorts.

Brienne shakes her head as she walks over to the side, out of his view, quickly gathering another bucket to pour over his head, followed by his scream.

“You scream like a girl,” she snorts.

“In contrast to you.”

Brienne snaps her jaws together. “Just so that you know – you will not provoke me to anger.”

“I already have! Look at you!” he shouts.

“If you want to believe that,” she sighs dismissively.
“I don’t just believe it, I know it. You are angry, for good reason. I know you want to strike me down. Why don’t you do it? Or try at least? But if there is any honor in you after all, you’d at least unwrap my chains before, or else the fight would be very uneven,” Jaime challenges her, now almost in a frenzy.

“Nice try,” Brienne huffs, looking around. “In any case, I will get you new clothes now.”

“And you just leave me here?” Jaime asks, his grin as wicked as his nature seemingly is. “How daring of you. I just want to warn you that this will give me any chains to get out of my chains, grab the pitchfork over there, and shove it through your belly.”

“I dare doubt it,” Brienne tells him nonchalantly.

“Oh, you shouldn’t dare me like that, woman. I win any challenge I set out to do, didn’t you know?” he tells her.

Brienne whistles once as she presses her fists into the non-existent curve of her hip.

Jaime licks his lips, beads of cold water running down his handsome face. “This may be your last chance to swing yourself upon my cock. Because after that, you will be dead, sweetling. And it would be very improper of me to kill you while still a maiden. You should have been fucked good and proper at least once. I mean, I am already wet, and now that my cock shrunk thanks to your ministration, it may not tear you in two at once when I’d pound into you. You wouldn’t even have to undress. Raise your skirts and swing your legs over the tub, hm? I can still kill you thereafter.”

Brienne stands there, says nothing, waits, and at last, she can hear the familiar noises, almost too silent for people to catch them, but not for her, because she listens, because those are noises familiar to her. She observes Jaime’s eyes widening as he sees Sun come into the barn, his steps slow but strong, only ever stopping once the direwolf is right in front of the Kingslayer.

“What is that?!?” he shouts, scrambling around the tub, though with the little leash he has, Jaime can’t do much of anything but stare at the animal standing before him.


“Seven Hells, that beast is enormous,” Jaime mutters, eyes wide, filled with fear.

“And I didn’t feed him yet,” Brienne says, patting his back as he steps between her and the Kingslayer.

Sun leans his head over the rim of the metal bucket. Jaime tries to move away as far as is possible.

“So, just to be clear, if you try to struggle out of your chains, Sun here will bite off your cock,” Brienne tells him.

Jaime licks his lips, eyes wide – and apparently filled with fear that Brienne obviously does not take any sort of satisfaction in.

How daring would that be?

“I will gather the clothes. See you in a bit,” Brienne says, before turning her attention to the lightly brown colored direwolf. “Sun? You know what to do.”

“He knows that he is supposed to bite off the cock?” Jaime calls after her.
“Well, I dare you to find out.”

With that she walks back over to the house to gather some old clothes her father no longer wears. She won’t give him her father’s good attire, that much is for sure. She chooses the ugliest clothes she can find to carry back to the stable behind the house, where she can hear Sun growl, which is music to her ears.

“Will you call back your beast now?” Jaime curses through gritted teeth.

“But he seems to like it!” Brienne teases, though for a moment, she has to stop herself, wondering where that suddenly comes from. She never did that before. Brienne jests with her father, maybe the children, but with grown men? Not so much.

*Though Kingslayers likely make a difference, specifically those who are nothing but taunt, arrogance, and cocksure smiles.*

“Woman, you want me to say that you treated me considerably well at the althing. Having that beast bite off my cock will not make me say that. Call him back! Now!” he demands with urgency.

Brienne whistles and Sun retreats at once to come up beside her, pressing his big head against her leg. Brienne pats over his scalp. “Good boy.”

Sun walks back out of the barn, presumably to lie down next to Moon on the ledge again, the way he always does. Because the beasts enjoy that one luxury in the world: They do not have to bother about clans, about arrangements, about Kingslayers showing up by their borders.

Jaime leans his head back, finding his body relax again. “I am glad to only have one beast to deal with, I will admit it.”

Brienne says nothing as she walks over to the ring to unhook the ropes. “Stand.”

“I am not your precious direwolf, you know?” Jaime grumbles.

“I know, in contrast to you, he knows how to heed.” She tosses a towel of linen at him. “Dry yourself.”

“You take pleasure in that, we both know it. Though I will remind you that there are much more pleasurable things that you could do instead of bossing me around,” Jaime grumbles as he moves his bound wrists up and down his naked frame. “I mean, maybe not as pleasurable for me, considering that you’d likely crush me with your weight, but I am benevolent that way.”

“When will you realize that it’s not working?” Brienne exhales.

“Judging by the way you keep scowling and blushing, it works just fine,” Jaime points out to her as he rubs himself dry with the towel, his skin a bit flushed from the cold, the friction of the rough fabric against his skin, and the fear that the Kingslayer would probably never admit to himself.

Brienne tosses the breeches at him next.

“We can also go on with the shirt so you can appreciate that view a while longer?” he argues, daring to shake his still bare hips in her direction to make his point.

“Do I have to call Sun back another time?” Brienne asks, cocking an eyebrow at him, trying her best not to let her gaze wander back down.
“Well, I assume that you would follow through with it, as dumb as you are,” Jaime huffs as he steps into the breeches. “Also, who calls her direwolf Sun?”

“Who calls himself a lion?”

“Ha, alright, I will give you that much,” Jaime chuckles as, at last, he laces his breeches. “But just to remind you, I can’t slip into the sleeves unless you untie me.”

He must think himself so very smart.

Brienne snorts as she pulls the ropes back through the ring.

“Really?” he mewls. Brienne rolls her shoulders with a grin. “As I said, I am not taking any chances.”

“That still doesn’t solve the problem of the sleeves,” he points out to her.

“It’s only a problem if there is no solution,” Brienne argues as she throws a linen shirt over his head.

“That has no sleeves. You want me to walk around sleeveless in that sort of weather? Have you completely lost your wits? Or didn’t you ever have them in the first place, you dumb goose?” Jaime pouts.

“You have to show more patience, Kingslayer,” Brienne tells him as she pulls the shirt down on either side. And if Brienne is not mistaken, his eyes narrow at the mention of the name his dishonorable actions earned him.

Good.

Yet, Jaime only goes on to lament, “Oh, great, this isn’t even closed on the sides. Then you might just as well outright kill me instead of having me suffer through the cold.”

“For that you pride yourself being a great warrior, you whine a lot,” the young woman huffs as she starts to lace the leather cords through the sides to close the seams.

“You happen to have woolen tunics for people you tie up? Now, there is wonder,” he scoffs.

“It’s just more efficient for some kinds of clothing,” Brienne says as she keeps threading the leather cords through the holes, one by one.

“Such as?” he asks, and if Brienne didn’t know better, she’d be inclined to think that he is earnestly curious about the matter.

“For when you have to take a look at injured limbs. If you can unlace it, it names no difference even if there are swellings. And you don’t have to cut open the sleeves because they already are. For when the days are hot or training is demanding and you need to let in some fresh air. Or when you don’t always want to resew clothes because your father keeps gaining and losing weight,” Brienne tells him. “Well, and in case of Kingslayers, this seems to work as well.”

“Who could have guessed?” Jaime chuckles as she wraps the first sleeve over his arm to start lacing it.

“Who could have guessed what?” she asks, eyes fixed on the leather strings.

“That a woman like you could even sew,” he says as she makes a knot.
“There are not many women quite like me,” Brienne tells him as she wraps the second sleeve over his arm.

“As there are no men like me, only me.”

Brienne finishes the last set of laces. “There, that is the tunic, now we will add this quilted tunic, and you should be able to make it through the night without freezing to death.”

“Well, you can always sneak into my bed to keep me warm. And I could make you feel very hot as a reward,” he teases.

Brienne reckons she’ll simply have to get used to that as the Kingslayer seemingly has no intention to stop that any time soon.

“That presumes that you get a bed,” she points out to him.

He frowns. “What? Where else would you have me sleep?”

“Wherever I see fit.”

“And in your bed is not fit?” he asks.

Brienne shakes her head. “Most definitely not.”

“Hm, well, little surprising,” Jaime hums. “You are too uptight for that. For now anyway. That is, until I’ve loosened you up.”

Brienne goes on wordlessly as she laces the jacket, which Jaime only seems to take as an invitation to go on about the matter, “I will remind you one more time that we might use the moment now. It may well be the only time someone will please you properly, and all you have to do is to untie me.”

“My father said that you are my prisoner, and so you are. And I am sorry to inform you, but I don't climb under the furs with prisoners. As the Jarl’s daughter, that is unacceptable.”

“I won't stay your prisoner. Soon enough, I will be the son and likely future Jarl to the lands Tywin Lannister now commands,” Jaime tells her with a pang of pride.

“But for now, you are my prisoner,” she points out to him drily.

“For now indeed. Perhaps far shorter than you think,” he say in a sing-song.

Brienne snorts at that. “As I said, for that you have to kill me first.”

“And I will remind you that I managed to kill a King, which earned me my precious byname. I tend to believe that if you manage to kill a king, a jarl’s daughter is not as much of a problem.”

“You go on believing that,” Brienne sighs, unimpressed, as she grabs the ring again to undo the knots there.

“What’s that ring good for?” Jaime asks, tilting his head, which has Brienne wondering if that man has ever been out in the wild for real, or only ever shouted commands during raids, secure on one of the big ships that stay out of the battles.

“You seriously have never seen that before?” she asks.

“I’m a jarl’s son,” Jaime replies, as though that was the answer to everything.
Brienne shakes her head. “I’m a jarl’s daughter, and still I know that this is where you hook the dead animals’ feet upon to skin them and bleed them out.”

“Ah, so that’s what it’s for. You see, when I skin animals while out in the wild, I don’t bother about metal hooks. Ropes and a branch will have to do. And when I am back home, I have others do it for me, as the Jarl’s first son,” Jaime chuckles softly, having Brienne wonder for the briefest of moments whether the man is genuinely curious or just boasting yet again.

Brienne blows out air through her nostrils, unimpressed. “As I was saying, a spoiled jarl’s son. I’ve seen enough of those.”

“You don’t know me,” Jaime argues, yet again, sounding sincerer during those small moment that should mean nothing, but apparently mean something to him.

“When is the last time you have been at an althing?” Brienne questions.

“I normally don’t come with. My little brother takes the honor, and Father lets him because he knows the Imp will complain about it until next year. Why?”

“Because that proves my point. You have no interest the duties the position of the Jarl’s son comes with,” Brienne explains. “If you have any intention to also become a jarl in the future.”

Jaime looks at her through narrowed eyes. “I fulfilled a duty that is beyond your grasp, woman.”

“Oh really, like what? Killing a man cowardly, from behind? Betraying and lying? Hunting treasures in our lands without permit?” Brienne challenges him, which seems to irritate the Kingslayer, who answers in a more forceful tone, “As I said, that is the kind of stuff people like you cannot even fathom because they are too idly focused on earning Odin’s love and respect to get themselves a place in Vallhalla. Even if that means that they have to damn Midgard, and all of the people living within.”

“If you think that of me, then that is so,” Brienne replies. If he insists that she doesn’t know him, then so she can insist that he doesn’t know her. They are two strangers – and Brienne wants it to stay that way.

“Isn’t it the truth?” he asks.

“I don’t have to share those truths with you,” Brienne answers. “Now come back to the house.”

“Will your mutt be there to threaten my cock again?” Jaime questions.

She shrugs. “Depends on how you behave.”

“You tell me, is there food and drink for your kinds of prisoners or do I have to feed off of maggots? Oh, or do you give me a knife to kill something for myself?” Jaime questions with a smirk. “I would like that very much!”

“Depends on how you behave,” Brienne repeats. Though that only ever seems to fuel his frustration, which is something Brienne starts to understand has something strangely pleasing about it.

“Has anyone ever told you that you are as boring as you are ugly?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you are as arrogant as you are an ass?”

They walk back to the house, over mud and grass, under much moaning and wordless lamenting.
coming from Brienne’s prisoner. Brienne guides him inside, which is rather unsettling for her once she realizes that she lets the enemy into her home.

Last time someone invaded her home, they had to flee and never look back.

“Can we negotiate on the chains at least?” he mewls, pulling Brienne out of her thoughts, away from the place that once was her home, back to the place that is now her home.

“No.”

“Maybe just ropes?”

“No.”

“That is *not* how you negotiate,” Jaime grumbles. “You see, normally, you start out with something, then I tell you what I would want. And then you make some concession to meet me somewhat in the middle.”

Brienne sighs in a sing-song, “And I told you that I do not negotiate.”

“Ugh.” He looks up to the ceiling disapprovingly.

“Sit,” Brienne orders, gesturing at the table.

Jaime narrows his eyes at her. “You will keep bossing me around, won’t you?”

“Who else would I be bossing around if not my prisoner?” Brienne snorts. “Now sit.”

Jaime grumbles as he lowers himself on the wooden chair. “You sincerely intend to keep me on a leash even in the house?”

“Yes. As I will carry my axe with me wherever I go,” Brienne warns him.

“Even when you take your bath in ice cold water?” he teases.

“Even then.”

“Hm.”

Brienne puts down a wooden bowl before him, along with a cup filled with milk to the rim. “The bread’s likely rather hard, now that it’s cooled down mostly, but if you mix pieces with the stew, it will soften back up. The milk is fresh. I wouldn’t think it’s good to have you drink ale on an empty stomach.”

The young woman is surprised when the Kingslayer downs almost half of the cup at once, a white film framing his bearded mouth, before the Kingslayer hastily scoops the stew with chunks of hard bread into his mouth wordlessly.

*For that he can’t seem to shut his mouth, the man is surprisingly silent now.*

Brienne motions back to the windowsill to break another loaf of rye bread into smaller pieces she places on a platter to put down on the table before him as she seats herself across Jaime. The Kingslayer goes on to shovel the food into his mouth silently, not caring if half of the stew dribbles down his chin.

It is only then that she sees a bit of a glistening in his eyes, tears he doesn’t allow to fall, let alone
But I can still see them.

Brienne licks her lips, her voice quiet as she speaks, “When is the last time you ate properly?”

Jaime chews a few more times, moving his jaws, eyes averted, before he goes on to say, “Can’t remember. Wasn’t much to find where we travelled to at first, off the usual tracks. Then we got caught by those three fools. And your folks didn’t have much love to give or food to spare. Not surprisingly. You don’t feed prisoners you think you get to eat or sacrifice to the Gods, though that fat guy may have thought about properly fattening us up to get more out of the bargain.”

“They still have to learn the rules of proper hostage taking,” Brienne huffs.

“You mean… killing the guys before you take them hostage?” he snorts, amused.

“Maybe. But I am of the opinion that a malnourished prisoner is even less use than a prisoner in general is. So… I rather keep him fed and healthy. Or else the prisoner only causes more trouble,” Brienne tells him. “More milk?”

Jaime nods as he swallows a bigger chunk of meat. Brienne stands back up to fill up jug to pour him another cup, which Jaime almost promptly drinks half empty.

“The bread’s pretty good for that it’s already cold,” Jaime says, not looking up only just once. “Normally, they are like wood chips by the time.”

She shrugs. “I already told you, there is only a problem if there is no solution.”

“Then what is the secret trick of your rye bread?” he asks.

“I wouldn’t share such vital information with the enemy.”

His lips curl into a smile as he swallows another chunk of bread, washing it down with milk. “Yeah, might be for the best. Might bring the turn in a war one day.”

Brienne refills his cup with fresh milk once more.

“Thank you,” he mutters, his voice almost not audible, but still there.

“But?” she asks, waiting for the next jape she is sure to come. Yet, to Brienne’s utter bewilderment, if not shock, the Kingslayer simply looks at her, his eyes shining wetly, his face hiding no sarcasm, no misgivings.

“Huh? No but. Just… thank you.”

Brienne blinks, but then just watches on silently as Jaime keeps eating as though he didn’t have anything for years.

The Kingslayer showing some gratitude? Now there is truly wonder.

And suddenly, he seems far less threatening.

Because even the Kingslayer is like any other creature roaming the earth after all.

And all animals must drink.
All animals must eat.

Even lions.

Chapter End Notes

*veslingr* (according to internet sources I call no authority to other than I read it on separate sites) is supposed to roughly translate to "puny wretch." I just thought it would be fun to throw in some Viking-sounding cuss words, though I promise to keep it low as I don't speak the language at all and because we have them speak English most of the time, but for once... I wanted to have some fun with that! :D
By the Well and Down the Hill

Chapter Summary

Brienne still struggles to go about her usual routines as they continue to be interrupted by her prisoner, who has only one goal in mind: Escape.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Thanks so much for the kind comments I have received from you. They made me a wee bit surer about myself and this story.

Oh yeah, FYI, it's really important to note for Jaime that he *really* wants to get out of that place for reasons not yet named, but I have to have him act like a dick. That makes the enemies to lovers ever the more rewarding, LOL. But yeah, right now I am orienting myself and the narrative along the lines of what was the Riverland Adventures for Jaime and Brienne in canon, and there, Jaime used any opportunity to get away, let's be real.

So yeah, I hope you are going to like the chapter!

Much love! ♥♥♥

Brienne sighs as she sits at the kitchen table, bound to do needlework *yet again*. On one of her better dresses no less, thanks to her prisoner and new source of madness.

*The Kingslayer shall be damned! Shall the mighty Fenrir bite off both his hands and his cock, if only to make him shut up at last!*

A few days have passed since the Kingslayer was pushed into the mud in front of their home, invaded their lives, and particularly her life, because Brienne’s father made the Kingslayer her responsibility, her duty.

Just yesterday, Jaime tried – *miserably so* – to escape her as Brienne escorted him to the pit where he is supposed to relieve himself. The man just turned on the heel, having Brienne believe that he would just swing his member her way to pass water right at her. Thus, Brienne back-stepped, only for Jaime to try to push past her and knock her to the ground. They wrestled shortly until her axe was by his throat and the Kingslayer just smirked at her, telling Brienne that it was “worth the try.” In the process, he’d managed to make a tear in her dress, so not only did Brienne have to wash it thoroughly, but also is now bound to do needlework in the morning.

*As though I have nothing else to do!*
However, it taught Brienne that she cannot underestimate this man or his wickedness. Jaime will use any opportunity to escape, and likely kill them all in the process if he is given the chance.

*If I don’t kill him first, that is,* Brienne thinks to herself in frustration as she makes another stitch. That is when his voice rings out from her room, distracting Brienne from her needlework. “I need to go see the pit, wench!”

Oh, and he calls her *wench* now. If only to provoke Brienne to anger even more than he does by virtue of his mere existence.

Brienne hisses as she accidentally thrusts the needle into her thumb. The young woman growls as she pushes up from the chair, tosses the dress into one of the bast baskets nearby, only to stomp into her room to see about the man invading her life.

“Would you keep it down a bit? Father’s still asleep,” Brienne snaps as she comes inside.

“I need to piss, wench. So unless you want me to relieve myself on your floor, you better untie me now before I can no longer hold it,” the Kingslayer argues.

Jaime was *not at all* pleased when Brienne tied him into a very tight bundle, leaving him almost no room whatsoever to move.

*Served him right anyway.*

Brienne bends down to start on the knots of the ropes bound about his body.

“You know, this is ridiculous, to tie me up like that. Even a dog gets more leash,” Jaime laments, rolling a bit on the floor for emphasis.

“A dog won’t kill me in my sleep,” Brienne points out to him, which has Jaime laugh at her, flashing his teeth, “Ha, so you recognize that I would accomplish that.”

“I don’t. I just don’t fancy having to dodge your *futile* attempts of escape every night. I’d never get any sleep if I did,” Brienne tells him bluntly. “And consider this, Kingslayer: I could also put you in the locked hole we dug close to our house and just cover it with leaves for the night. Would you rather have that as your bed for the night?”

He frowns, tilting his head to the side slightly. “Why do you have that hole anyway?”

“You are my guest to find out,” she huffs.

“I think I’ll pass,” he snorts, only to moan, “Oh, Gods. To be able to move one’s legs again… you’d have no idea how relieving that is!”

Jaime shuffles his legs on the ground as Brienne goes on to untie the knots.

“Well, maybe you wouldn’t be in that situation if you had behaved yourself by the pit last time,” she tells him with a forced blank expression.

*And tore my good dress!*

“It is part of the animal’s nature to mean to escape imprisonment. Imprisonment is no natural state for a living creature to be in,” he grumbles, his legs still moving on the ground, though Brienne reckons he really relishes the free movement.

*Not that I care, though.*
“If you rather wanted to be dead, we can well arrange for that,” she says with a cocked eyebrow.

“We both know you won’t. Your father’s orders. Remember?” he huffs with the kind of self-assured smile that the young woman already learned to detest.

Brienne blows out air through her nostrils when Jaime bends his legs to push against her back, forcing her to sit down on top of him, which has the Kingslayer grin at her ever the more ridiculously.

“If you think you can wrestle me to the ground to escape, you should have learned that lesson by now, after that shameful attempt back by the pit,” Brienne warns him.

“Shameful? I was not the one flushed over both cheeks once we were done. And as I keep saying, the offer still stands,” Jaime argues with a smirk. “Undo my chains and I will undo your smallcloth to free you of the shackles of maidenhood.”

For emphasis, the Kingslayer rolls his hip to rub against her pelvis, to which Brienne smacks him hard.

“Ow! Woman, not the face!” he pouts.

“What did I say about keeping it down?” Brienne hisses, feeling heat rise to her cheeks, certain that it will color them crimson.

*And all of that because of him!*

Jaime sucks the inside of his cheek into his mouth. “Well, stop smacking me.”

“You started this,” Brienne retorts, but the Kingslayer just goes on rolling on the ground as though he was a pouty child. “I still need to piss. Hurry it up already.”

“There, done,” Brienne sighs before struggling to stand above him. Jaime rewards her with a faux innocent smile and a tease, “Lifting your skirts now? You really better let me relieve myself before giving yourself to me and my cock. I wouldn’t want to get piss on you. I am not lying when I say my bladder is about to *burst*.”

Brienne gives the leash a tug to force Jaime to straighten up.

“You are a wicked woman, wench,” he grumbles.

“Tell me something that I don’t already know,” she huffs, pulling on the leash again. “Now come, before you are bound to wet yourself like a small child.”

“Even small children have the freedom to relieve themselves in the midst of the night,” he grumbles as he stands, shaking out his limbs a few more times.

Brienne pulls him along through the hallway. “Small children are no misbehaving Kingslayers, however, so it stands to reason that they are granted more leash. They earned it.”

Jaime rolls his eyes at her, which is why Brienne only ever gives the leash another tug. They pass the kitchen, then get outside, over to the pit behind the house, through wet grass and mud still cold due to the heavy mist hanging above the tree line. They reach the pit.

“Finally!” Jaime cries out joyfully once the pit comes into sight, walking up to where he is supposed to relieve himself with fast strides.
“Be quick about it,” she grumbles, looking around as he fumbles with his breeches.

The Kingslayer messed up all of her routines, which makes Brienne hate him even more than she does anyway. Thanks to him, she had to sew before getting the water, which means the animals will be making noises if she doesn’t hurry it up. She still has to put the dough on the fire to get the rye bread done for the day, if only she didn’t have to finish up the needlework first because she wants to go to town later the day – and that is one of her few decent dresses.

He destroys everything.

And she loathes him for it.

Fenrir, please, do your work! And be quick about it!

“The Gods are good, so, so good, at last,” Jaime moans almost gleefully as he starts to relieve himself into the pit, leaning his head back with a grin. “Say, wench.”

“My name is not wench,” she growls.

“I am aware, but that won’t stop me from calling you such,” Jaime argues with a light laugh, while continuing to relieve himself. “So anyway, wench. I kept wondering last night…”

“Could you just take care of business and not talk while at it?” she interrupts him.

“If someone is around, I always talk. Helps me get the bladder completely empty,” Jaime laughs. “And think about it, then you don’t have to listen to the noise so much.”

Brienne blows out air through her nostrils. “… You were wondering?”

“Oh, right,” the Kingslayer cackles, seemingly pleased with himself for having her talk to him as he suggested. “About those magical crops of yours. You think there is a chance that the prisoner gets to see them some time soon?”

“Why should I take you to see our crops?” she asks.

And why would the son of Jarl Tywin want to see their little shred of land that no one else wanted, that no one else bothered to claim until they did? For all she knows, there is plenty of everything at the Rock, and of what there isn’t enough, Jarl Tywin can buy with his precious gold.

“Because I asked nicely?” he suggests, to which she snorts, “Not really.”

To her, it seems that the Kingslayer doesn’t even know what being nice actually means. Because it doesn’t mean destroying dresses or treating her the way he does.

“I could reward you…,” Jaime means to say, but Brienne cuts him off, “Not that again!”

“Well, I suppose seeing me piss doesn’t get your juices flowing. Understandably, I’d assume,” Jaime says, rolling his broad shoulders with nonchalance. “But the point is this: I’d like to see those magical crops, if they are for real, you see?”

“I don’t care if you believe in them or not. They will not disappear just because you do not have faith in their existence,” Brienne points out to him.

“Where did you find them anyway? Magical seeds? Did you sacrifice a whole herd of cattle to win the Gods’ favor? Oh, or did you all have a group orgy on there to bring seeds to the ground?” he laughs, bobbing up and down as he continues emptying his bladder… he really seems to take his
"That is nothing I’d have to share with you," Brienne argues. She doesn’t have to share anything with him, beside her chamber until they can bring him along to the althing so that this whole ordeal is over and she can start worrying again about her father’s plans for her future.

"Just because you don’t have to doesn’t mean you can’t,” Jaime argues, shaking out his cock as he is done at last. “Oh, or was it only you who spread her honey there to bring forth seedlings? I mean, it must be a miracle, to get a prim and uptight one as you wet, perhaps that’s what it takes to make barren ground fertile again.”

"Tie up the breeches. I want to go back inside,” Brienne grumbles, letting out a shuddered breath to calm herself before giving the leash a light tug.

"Oh, by all means,” Jaime agrees as he laces his breeches, if under effort thanks to the cuffs around his wrists. “Lead me back to the chamber and I will milk your honey to make your lands full of miracle and wonder even more fertile than they already are. How does that sound? And all you have to do is…”

"Unwrap your chains,” she completes as they start treading back through mud and grass.

"Precisely,” he agrees, cocking an eyebrow at her. “So?”

Brienne shoves him in the shoulder hard to make him walk up the path leading to the house. “Walk.”

"No matter how much you think that was a good comeback, you should realize that I could still pound into you if you lifted your skirts and sat on my lap much better than you pound against me. And all for one simple act of untying me,” he tells her.

"I am not as foolish as you take me to be,” Brienne grunts.

"And I still think you are not nearly as smart as you believe yourself to be. And even if not, it’s always about finding a person’s weak spot and attacking it without relent, without abandon. And I am really, really good at finding those invisible marks.”

"Are you?” she huffs, unimpressed.

Men tend to pride themselves with way too much, particularly those things they actually haven’t achieved.

"All raids I led were successful,” Jaime points out to her.

"I see. Well, of course, it’s easy to say if you raid on villages that have no capacity to stand a chance against your father’s armies. And… this one? Not so much, unless of course you consider it a battle won to be held prisoner by a lower jarl’s ugly, uptight daughter.”

"You really take the fun out of everything. I was just jesting,” he grumbles, to which Brienne shoves him up the stairs, “Go on, I still have other things to do, and far more important chores than escorting you to the pit so you can relieve yourself.”

"What else would there be but to live for me?” he chimes.

"I still have to muck out the stables.”

He frowns, amused. “And that’s better than escorting me to the pit to take a piss?”
“Oh, by all means,” Brienne answers. “Any pig is better company than you are.”

She stops at the door, which has Jaime reel back, almost losing his footing. “Hey!” he pouts.

“You will keep it quieter this time around, or else you will be sleeping in the stables, hooked up on the ring,” she warns him.

“You wouldn’t,” Jaime challenges, narrowing his eyes at her. Brienne glowers at him in turn. “Don’t dare me.”

Jaime glares back at her for a long moment, but Brienne is not at all willing to back down. The Kingslayer is the one to break off the eye contact first, huffing, “… Fine.”

They walk back inside quietly.

“Sit,” Brienne orders, gesturing at one of the chairs by the kitchen table.

“I am not your wolf,” Jaime grumbles. “So could you stop talking to me like I was one?”

“Sit, before I tie you back up again,” she warns him, unimpressed.

“Ugh,” he grunts, falling down on the chair unceremoniously.

Brienne shakes her head as she grabs the bowl filled with dough from the windowsill to carry back to the table along with the pot of flour.

“The Jarl has a very deep sleep,” Jaime notes, tilting his head in direction of her father’s bedchamber.

“You should be glad for it, or else you’d get smacked far more often,” Brienne tells him as she removes the cloth she previously put over the dough. “And harder.”

“As though you didn’t already smack me often enough for no reason whatsoever,” Jaime huffs. And while he tries to act a disinterested as possible, Brienne can see a sense of curiosity in the Kingslayer’s green eyes as he watches her go about her daily tasks, if only just preparing bread.

Though that may stand to reason – seems like he’s never seen that, as a spoiled jarl’s son.

Brienne blows out air through her nostrils as she pours some flower over the dough and her hands, before she rips out parts of the dough to roll between her big hands to make them round. She just has to get back to her routines, even if under the watchful eye of the Kingslayer of all people in the world.

“Wouldn’t you rather be swinging around the axe instead of the rye dough? You don’t seem like the type to be domestic,” he asks.

“I will be swinging the axe later the day. There is a time for everything,” Brienne tells him, putting down the first ball of dough on the flat pan.

“But tell me, you seem to take pride in being a shieldmaiden. Why wouldn’t you want to do that more often? All the time? To be a warrior? Instead of kneading dough and mucking out the stables?” Jaime asks, and if Brienne is mistaken, he is about as curious about it as his eyes are as they watch her roll the dough.

“It needs to be done,” she says simply.

“By you? You could have one of the little slave girls do it for you. For a jarl’s daughter, you truly are
actin by far too much like a peasant woman,” Jaime huffs. “Well, however womanly you are.”

“We don’t go about slaves in that way,” Brienne points out to him.

“Which is to say you don’t have any thralls,” Jaime snorts, shaking his head. “Just what a poor excuse of a clan are you? No raiding, no thralls. What do you have other than some magical crop that may or may not be by the mountainside?”

“We have former thralls here, freedmen and freedwomen, as they were given lands when we settled here, too. They go about the farming with fervor, because they know they earn from the good work they do. Also, that means they don’t turn against us, but rather fight alongside us. We saw it a few villages over – the thralls raised against their jarl and his karls. Many lost their lives, and in the end, things were only destroyed rather than built.”

It was one of those decisions that carried over back from their old life into the new, just that more and more were added as they were ashore, far away from home, without a place to stay. Brienne was still too young by the time to understand why her father insisted on that he will only have free men and women live amongst them, but as she grew up and realized what it meant, she was proud that her father was not abiding those rules and instead chose his own to live by.

Her father knows of the dangers, always knew of it, but he made that clear back on the isle long since gone already, that things would go different there, because his interest has always been to grow rather than destroy, to protect rather than raid. And while many disagreed at first and some old souls still want to see the former rules come back to light, they will not so long her father or Brienne still draw a living breath. It is one of those echoes from the former days that just has to live on, because it was good, because it was true.

“That’s because those fools didn’t know how to control their thralls, then,” Jaime huffs.

“Precisely,” Brienne agrees. “And we don’t control thralls, we have rules for all free men and women alike, and those are the rules we reinforce. Since then, we had no rise of former thralls come upon us.”

And while their old world may have burned, it was not for that reason, Brienne knows that much. It was for something else, which has her believe that her father, at any point, had the rights of it. This is how you grow futures, this is how you harvest them.

“You shouldn’t ever bring that up at an althing. Your father would lose any respect,” Jaime warns her.

“Which is a pity, because we profit from that knowledge greatly,” Brienne sighs.

Jaime frowns. “What knowledge?”

“That it is not just imprisonment that is no natural state for a living creature to be in, but also to live displaced. And we learned that people thrive more on freedom and property, that they have food to provide for themselves and their families, and that they get to make choices on their own than they ever would on being under control, beaten down, and traded like cattle.”

“Yet again thoughts you should not bring up at an althing. Too revolutionary, I fear,” he huffs, blowing air up his nose to swing some loose strands of hair out of his eyes. “Next you will say that the slaves should be granted to become jarls, too.”

“My father brought it up during previous things, but the karls wouldn’t have it, yet anyway. But they are now granted to undergo military training to join our soldiers – if they want. We are too few
people for the karls to object the need.”

“That’s what I am talking about. The mills of the Gods grind slowly, way too slowly,” Jaime sighs.

Brienne frowns as she starts to roll the next glob of dough. Because, for a moment, the Kingslayer sounded almost remorseful about that circumstance.

But that can’t be. Kingslayers don’t concern themselves with the people, even less so when they ride under the lion banner of Lannister.

“In any case… one piece of advice, if you don’t mind: Maybe you should try to convince a man to wed you at the next althing by giving him your rye bread instead of bruises,” Jaime teases, winking at her. “Some boys like a challenge, but some are too coward to answer the call once they are confronted with a giant of a challenge. The rye bread may be your one rewarding quality.”

“Most kind of you to say,” she huffs, narrowing her blue eyes at him.

“Oh, you know, I can be very kind if you treat me well in turn,” Jaime chuckles, only to have Brienne almost jump from her seat when his booted foot travels up her bare calf underneath the table. She glowers at the Kingslayer, who only ever gives her his typical wicked grin.

And the Allfather knows I loathe it!

“I just meant to give you a first taste of my kindness. Sit back down and I shall show you even more of it. We both know you want it, to have me please…,” Jaime taunts, only to let a small yelp of surprise when a handful of rye flour hits him across the face. He sputters and spits, blinking his eyes to make the white dust fall off his lashes while Brienne walks back to the windowsill wordlessly to leave the balls of dough to sit there beneath a moist cloth.

“That was absolutely unnecessary,” Jaime grumbles, spitting a bit on every s-sound.

While Brienne feels satisfaction for having caught him off-guard, she knows that this only means more work in the end because she will have to wipe the table even more thanks to him leaving spit and flour everywhere.

He just means nothing but effort, nothing but work, nothing but me losing my last nerve!

Brienne already opens her mouth in reply when her father, his eyes still narrow slits from the sleep, waddles into the kitchen.

“Good morning, Father,” she greets him, pulling back his chair for him while getting up.

“What is that ruckus about?” he asks, rubbing his eyes, frowning as he catches a glance of the Kingslayer sitting in the chair across from him, his face white with flour, sputtering and spitting halfway across the table.

“He got some flour on himself and is now complaining about the matter,” Brienne says, which has Jaime correct her rather loudly, and childishy, “You threw it at me, which is a waste of food, by the way.”

“I hope we didn’t rouse you?” Brienne asks her father with concern, which only has Jaime pout for the lack of attention.

A child indeed. A misbehaving one on tops.
“No, no, the leg’s been giving me trouble again,” Selwyn tells her, still studying Jaime with a mixture of curiosity and irritation as he sits down.

“I will go to see Maggy later the day. Maybe she has some balm to spare. The one she made last time worked pretty well, did it not?” Brienne asks, already busying herself with pouring him a cup of mild ale.

“Oh, there is no need to rush it, daughter,” Selwyn argues. “I will just take it easy today.”

“It is no bother. I will be down in the village anyway. The girls, remember?” she argues.

“Have you thought about how you wish to handle him yet?” her father asks, nodding at the still flour-covered face of Jaime Lannister, who rewards him with a big grin in turn. “It appears she has forgotten all about me, Jarl Selwyn!”

“I would normally take care of him, but I don’t know with my leg. If he makes a run for it, it will be too late,” Selwyn argues.

“I will just take him with and tie him up somewhere,” Brienne replies, rolling her shoulders, which, obviously, has Jaime object at once, “Like a bloody dog?! You do remember who I am?”

“As you keep reminding everyone over and over again?” Brienne huffs, turning her attention back to her father. “It should be no bother. There is a wooden pole there that I can use for the matter. You can just rest, alright?”

“Thank you,” he says, giving her a small smile.

“It’s nothing,” Brienne replies, before turning back to Jaime. “Come now, we are going.”

“To where? We just got back!” Jaime hoots. “And why?”

“Since you keep messing with my duties for the day, I still have to get the water for the animals. So that is what we are to do now,” Brienne explains. “Does that answer your questions, Kingslayer?”

“Can’t you leave me here to wash up at least?” he grumbles, gesturing at himself, as far as the cuffs allow him to.

“You can clean yourself by the well,” she snaps. “Now come.”

She tugs on the leash harsh enough to almost make him fall off the chair. Jaime growls as he gets up and stomps after her.

“Sorry that I have to leave so early, Jarl Selwyn! I know how ungracious it is to just leave the Jarl’s table!” Jaime calls out as Brienne already pulls him through the door.

“Be careful!” her father shouts as they are already outside.

“I will,” Brienne calls back.

Together, the two start to trot up the hill, but Brienne stops to gather the empty buckets set by the fence to carry along before they go on towards the well.

“Just so that you know, a Lannister always pays his debts. And I will pay you back in interest for all of this,” Jaime hisses, still busy spitting out flour and shaking his head to get the white powder off, though to no avail.
“For keeping you alive, fed, and returning you to your people as you suggested it?” Brienne huffs. Because at some point she can’t understand the resistance. While she can bring herself to comprehend that he doesn’t want to stay a prisoner and thus laments about his treatment, she doesn’t get it that the Kingslayer is seemingly so invested in breaking out, when he was the one to suggest to keep the peace and wait until the althing for him to be returned to his family.

But then again, a man of dishonor is likely to break his word.

“You could show me at least some respect!” he pouts.

“You haven’t earned it yet,” Brienne points out to him bluntly.

“I am Jaime Tywinson, I am…,” he means to say, but Brienne cuts him off before he can recount all of his deeds and names, “Precisely. You are a jarl’s son. That doesn’t get you my respect. You were born that way. That’s nothing you had to work for. I didn’t have to work for being born a jarl’s daughter either, but I am trying my best to earn my respect as such now that I can. Thus, for the mere fact that you were born that way, I don’t owe you any sort of respect.”

“So what? Am I supposed to work extra-hard to earn people’s respect because I was born that way? Not everyone is like you and lives like a peasant girl in the vain hope that this will buy her the people’s appreciation,” Jaime huffs, though he’d likely never know how deep that cuts for Brienne. “The lion does not concern himself with the opinion of the sheep.”

She is a hard worker, and while Brienne tries to keep to herself up on the hill, deep down, surely, she would also rather have the people’s respect instead of misgiving, but Brienne is not getting it, no matter her hard labor, no matter her efforts. And in contrast to Jaime’s case, being born a certain way does nothing to fix that. Being born a jarl’s daughter doesn’t get her even that bit of respect that they likely have for Jaime for the mere mention of his name, even if the echo of the Kingslayer always swings within.

“And anyway,” Brienne goes on. “You don’t treat me respectfully either, Kingslayer, so stop complaining when I do so to the same measure with you.”

“… What would earn me your respect, then?” Jaime asks, craning his neck. “What great deed would a spoiled jarl’s son the likes of me have to commit for an oh so honorable jarl’s daughter to accept him as a respectable man? Hm?”

“Shutting your filthy mouth every once in a while? Knocking it off with your futile attempts of provoking me to anger? Not destroying my clothes all the time?” she suggests. “To name but few.”

“Aw, you had a tear in your dress. You poor thing,” he taunts her. “Remember when you cut my clothes from my body? Seems like the Gods are good and true after all, serving justice by getting right back at you for my sake and that of my poor clothes.”

“I could have left you in the tatters just as well. Would you rather have had that?” Brienne asks. “I bet I can still find them somewhere to put back on you, if you wished for it.”

“You cut them off me with your battle axe. That is not normal,” Jaime huffs. “Small wonder men are scared of you. You may even make the mighty Thor shake in fear.”

“It was necessary,” Brienne grounds out.

He’d have no idea that it takes far less to have men be scared of her. This is the first time Brienne cut off a man’s attire with a battle axe. For most others, it’s enough to… simply be there.
They reach the well, which used to be a site of tranquility and peace for Brienne, until the Kingslayer disrupted it. Now it’s only another task that has him trotting behind her, watching her, judging her, laughing at her, mocking her.

Even the smell of fresh grass doesn’t seem as strong as it used to be ever since that man was brought to his knees before her.

Brienne puts down the buckets she brought along before wrapping Jaime’s leash around the wooden beam hanging above the well, giving him only just enough leash to keep his arms at a normal position.

“Seriously?” Jaime pouts.

“I need both my hands to pull up the bucket, so yes, seriously,” Brienne says, unimpressed with his lament, before she continues to turn the crank to bring the bucket attached to the rope down to the water below, which it does with a loud splash echoing all the way to the top of the well.

And for a small moment, there are only just the noises of water sloshing out of the bucket as it fills with water, and the rhythmical squeaking and crunching as Brienne turns the crank.

Well, until the Kingslayer opens his mouth again…

“May I ask what is wrong with your father’s leg?” Jaime asks, quieter this time.

“I can’t keep you from asking, unless I were to gag you,” Brienne hisses, not rewarding him with a glance, even.

Though I may actually do just that!

Jaime better make no mistake – he may speak ill of Brienne, she doesn’t bother as much, but if the Kingslayer dares to attack her father, Brienne will have him punished tenfold. For her father, for his honor, Brienne would pick any fight. Jaime wouldn’t ever know what an honorable man the likes of her father is, surrounded by liars, traitors, and those only out for their own advantage. He’d have no idea what it’s like to have to pull together and pull through in the face of hunger and displacement.

“I hope it’s nothing severe,” he says.

Brienne narrows her eyes, turning the crank ever the faster, which has the wooden construction almost screeching upon every turn. “I don’t need your joking on the matter.”

Because that is yet again one of those things Jaime would never understand because he has no clue what that is like, what it means to have your beloved father almost dying because of one foolish mistake.

“I wasn’t joking,” Jaime insists with a huff of exasperation, which has Brienne wonder for the fragment of a moment if the man is earnestly disappointed that she doesn’t take his concern seriously, but only just a moment – because the Kingslayer has no reason to concern himself with her father’s pains, or hers, or anyone else’s.

“Right,” she huffs.

He’d never know what it’s like to feel responsible the way she does, the spoiled Jarl’s son he is.

He’d never know what it’s like to fear for one’s father’s life the way she did after what happened.
He’d never know the shame, the nagging weight of the questions of what could have been.

He’d never know…

“Fine, then don’t believe a single word I say!” Jaime snaps. “And here I was just trying to be… a nice person. See where that gets me!”

“You do a miserable job at it,” Brienne retorts. “Needless to say that I know better than to share my loved one’s weakness with the enemy.”

“What would I do with that knowledge, you tell me? Anyone can see that he walks with a limp,” Jaime huffs. “That’s all but a secret.”

Brienne licks her lips, then stops turning the crank, her hand resting upon the handle.

While the young woman hates to admit, he does have a point. It’s not like Jaime can do anything with that knowledge even if he were to tell anyone. There is no advantage for him to know the details of it. And so, much to her own surprise, the words thus simply tumble out, not sensing any danger from being exposed to the light of day. “… Some time ago, someone wanted to sneak into our village, through the woods. It was only just one, but a good fighter. Father caught him. I was down to train the girls, so I came too late to help him. Father killed the man, of course, but in the course of the battle, that bastard kicked him in the knee hard enough to make it swell twice its size within a single day. For a time, Maggy wasn't sure if we weren’t forced to cut it off.”

Brienne only remembers sleepless nights, wiping sweat from her father’s brow with a wet cloth, praying to Odin, Frigg, and Eir to let her father regain health, not to take him away from her just yet.

That, and the shame and regret for him having to fight that battle all on his own. Shame foremost is on her mind whenever Brienne thinks back to those dark hours.

Because nothing is more hateful than failing to protect the ones we love.

“What did the man want?” Jaime asks, to Brienne’s surprise, apparently more concerned with the story than with teasing her about much of anything, when the Kingslayer had her believe that this was his only purpose as of late.

“Food, gold, coins, whatever was up for grabs,” Brienne replies, rolling her shoulders. “As my father says, there’s always a reason so long there are resources to fight over.”

“You blame yourself for it,” Jaime concludes with a kind of effortlessness that has Brienne swallow thickly.

“That is none of your concern,” she hisses.

Did I give myself away again? How can he tell after just so few words?

Jaime leans against the well slightly, glancing down the hill. “He is a jarl in his own right, a famous fighter for all I can tell, for even I have heard of his prowess and bravery to the point that it’s almost like tales already. You shouldn’t think your dour head sore about not having been there right on time. As far as I can tell, Jarl Selwyn can defend himself just fine. Stumbling and falling… it happens even to the best.”

And if Brienne didn’t know better, she’d be bound to believe that Jaime means to console her.

But that can most definitely not be the case.
“I know that. He defends all of us. Father is a formidable fighter, but that doesn’t mean I do not wish to protect him. He was alone up here,” Brienne admits before she can stop herself from saying those words. “With no one to have his back.”

And that is what it is all about, what it is supposed to be about, having each other’s back, protecting one another, so that what happened back in their old life does not repeat itself in this one.

“It’s a curious situation here anyway. Normally, the Jarl’s house would be more at the center, among the other longhouses in the village, no?” Jaime argues, nodding down to the town below. “I mean, naturally, my father likes to have his distance from what he considers to be no more than the sheep, but in most other villages, it’s done differently from here.”

“We have the best view here, to oversee everything,” Brienne tells him.

“But that also puts you in danger for when there is an ambush from behind. You are the first ones to get attacked,” Jaime replies pensively.

“We know that. Father specifically arranged for it. He says he just doesn’t want to spend too much time with the youths because they are annoying little shits, but the truth is actually that he wants to have his peoples’ backs. Father believes that best achieved by literally having their backs.”

By becoming their backs.

Their shield.

The trunk to a tree so that its branches can grow, grow strong and high into the sky.

“You have a curious jarl,” Jaime chuckles.

“You’d do better not to speak ill of him, or else you won’t have a tongue to speak with anymore soon enough,” Brienne snarls, starting to turn the crank again, which she almost forgot over the course of the conversation.

“Make no mistake, I quite like that approach. Daring, admittedly. Perhaps even foolish, but honorable no less. I mean, honorable acts are what gets you killed fastest, but that doesn’t make them any less dignified. Even a Kingslayer can see that,” Jaime argues, surprising Brienne. “And I must say, it may have its merits to have the small longhouse all to yourselves. Nicely quiet up here.”

“Not so at your home, I assume?” Brienne asks.

“Not even close,” Jaime laughs easily. “It’s always noisy, always loud. The Rock never seems to stand still, never seems to go to sleep. It’s nicely quiet here, there’s no way of denying that. I can’t remember the last time I heard birds sing in the woods or cicadas chirrup in the distance.”

Jaime looks down, which has Brienne wondering if that is yet another lie slipping from his tongue with ease or apparently a truth he is willing to share, because, judging by the way the Kingslayer looks on almost dreamily, his appreciation for the nature’s closeness seems honest, at least.

Brienne finally turned the crank often enough to bring the bucket to the surface, so she takes a good hold of the slippery wood to put down on the edge of the well with a thud, some of the water slopping out of it from the movement to splash to the ground below.

“Bend down,” she orders.

“What? Will you mean to take me from behind, wench?” Jaime taunts her. “I mean, I will admit, at
first glance I thought you had a cock, but now I am less convinced, so I would have to wonder how you’d mean to achieve the task.”

And here we go again. One moment he seems almost nice, and then no longer.

“Cup your hands so I can pour water over them. Or else you’ll wear the flour as war paint,” Brienne warns him.

Jaime laughs throatily as he bends his knees slightly and cups his hands to capture the water Brienne pours into them. Once his hands are full to the rim, Jaime splashes the cold liquid over his face to wash off the flour, leaving milky splatters on the ground beneath him. The two repeat the process a few more times until even the last of the rye has washed off the Kingslayer’s face, leaving nothing but his teasing smiles behind. Jaime straightens back up, only to shake his head from right to left, beads of water flying through the air, and hitting Brienne foremost.

“Stop that! What are you? A dog?” Brienne shrieks.

“A lion,” he corrects her, going on to shake his head a few more times for emphasis.

Brienne mutters some incoherent curses to herself as she rubs her hand over her face to get rid of the beads of water on her skin, before she goes ahead to grab one of the empty buckets to fill it with the remaining water.

“So? Have I gotten you wet?” Jaime teases.

“You know, the well is quite deep. I might just as well push you down, to see if the lion can swim,” Brienne sighs, nodding at the hole.

“Of course lions can swim, but they don’t like it,” Jaime chuckles. “Particularly in cramped, moldy wells.”

“So? Do I have to?” she asks, unimpressed.

“Not necessarily.”

“Good.”

The Kingslayer focuses his attention back on the view that presents itself to him as he glances over thick green grass, down the village below, whereas Brienne busies herself with turning the crank again to get the second bucket of water.

She is late anyway, and all that thanks to him – ever the more!

So much to the routines that normally put her at ease.

So much to her personal, tiny shred of peace.

After a few more turns, the bucket finally comes to the light and Brienne can fill the second bucket to carry back down.

“Oh, so are we done?” he asks, to which she scoffs, “Do you see any more buckets to fill, Kingslayer?”

Jaime rolls his eyes at her. “I was just trying to make conversation.”

“You do a lousy job at it,” Brienne retorts.
“You could appreciate the effort,” he argues, puckering his lips. “I don’t know many prisoners held in such poor conditions who would even bother with that.”

“Or I could not,” the young woman huffs before she reaches up to undo the knot over the wooden bar to retrieve Jaime’s leash. Brienne frowns when she can spot that ridiculous smile of his again. “What?”

“Hm? Just curious how you want to handle two full buckets that you cannot carry the way you did as we climbed up the mount because you want to keep the water in the buckets – while also handling that awful leash you keep on me. Of course you could order me to carry one, but… I am o clumsy and weak, I don’t know if I am going to manage,” Jaime says with a grin.

Brienne glowers at him. At this rate, carrying water back and forth will take up half her day. And even if she were to threaten him to take a bucket, of that she is certain, the Kingslayer would pour it out before they ever reached the stables.

“I mean, the easiest way would be to untie me. I may even carry one of the buckets for you and then make my sweet escape thereafter,” he taunts her with a smirk. “What do you say wench?”

“I say that it’s not even a nice try,” Brienne hisses, though he pointed something out that is sadly true, and to her great dismay something Brienne did not think of by the time she dragged him up here. She is used to being alone, she is used to not have a man on a leash to take along with her. Yet, here Brienne is, and suddenly, even something as simple and deeply ingrained into her system as getting the water for the animals seems awfully difficult.

“Well, that is your problem if you want to walk up and down to only ever get one fill to your precious animals,” Jaime chimes, pleased with himself for having caught her small dilemma. “And here I thought you had so much better to do with your oh so valuable time.”

Brienne shakes her head as she loops the end of the leash through her belt to make a tight knot. “Oh,” is all he says.

“There is only a problem if there is no solution,” Brienne tells him, feeling a bit more confident now. It’s not perfect, but it may do until they make it back down the mount, so she can think of a better solution the next time.

“Well, you should be careful that I don’t roll down the hill to put your solution to the test,” Jaime tells her with a wicked kind of grin.

“It would be the death of you, Kingslayer,” Brienne warns him, which has him only ever laugh at her, “Would it be?”

“Well, almost. We have to drag something of you back to the althing to give to your father,” Brienne says drily.

Jaime huffs as he starts to walk, being sure to walk fast enough to give Brienne a pull, which leaves her struggling for balance. She grits her teeth wordlessly, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of a reaction.

“You know, I could also do what you did to me and have you eat mud,” he hums.

“You can try.”

Jaime makes a leap forward, testing the waters, but Brienne anticipated that, so she makes a big step
to follow up without losing her balance.

_He will have to come up with something better if he wants to make a fool of me._

“Ha. So you don’t always walk like a clumsy bear. That was _almost_ graceful right there, woman,” Jaime laughs, throwing his head back. “For a horse, that is. I mean, you got the teeth for it.”

Brienne decides to treat his japes with silence as they walk back down the hill, briefly considering calling for Sun and Moon, but that would only make the Kingslayer believe that he’s won that game of his, however foolish it may be. And however foolish it may be of her in turn to bother not letting him win it.

“Why so silent, woman?” Jaime teases, skipping over rocks and mud as though he was a child stuck in the body of a grown man.

“Aww, so you show me the cold shoulder now? How unkind of you! That means I have no choice but to talk to myself! How else to entertain myself, right?” he hoots, making another leap, which almost has Brienne lose her balance, but only just almost.

“It’s no fun if you don’t curse me, wench!” Jaime grumbles playfully. “Well, almost. I mean, you still scowl as usual. So even if you try to treat me with silence, I know that you would love to curse me – that, or kiss me.”

Brienne only wished they were finally by the stables. She can already catch sight of them further down below, when suddenly, Jaime starts to run for a few steps, which has Brienne groan, bound to follow his lead for now, but then the Kingslayer abruptly stops in his tracks. Brienne catches this move too late, which is why she crashes into his back at full force. The young woman tumbles backwards. For some reason, the buckets fly out of her hand, but solidly land on the ground with spilling only a fourth of the water within, whereas Brienne lands on her rear roughly, pebbles biting into her hands as she slides over the stony ground, drawing blood.

Jaime wastes no time to turn around, grab some of the rope and approach her, seemingly with the intention of strangling her with his chains.

“Seems like my trying was successful at last,” he says, his eyes dark, sinister, his mouth a deadly snarl, making Brienne shudder for no more than a moment before her body calls her to action and hushes any fear out of her to focus on all but one thing: Survival.

As Jaime lunges at her, Brienne rolls to the side, and while he still manages to land on top of her, it gives her enough space to hook her right leg around his frame to use as leverage to turn him over with an “oomph” escaping his lips, though the Lion of Lannister doesn’t waste only just a second to start hitting against her shoulder, the sternum, the face, whatever part of her body he can get his hands on, trying to knock her off balance as Brienne is on top of him.

_But he’ll have to try harder if he means to knock me off!_

“If you want to live, you should just let me go,” Jaime growls, trying to pull free. “Or else I will kill you.”

Brienne tries to grab the axe from her belt, but Jaime has a bruising grip on her wrist to prevent her from getting it. Their hands fight for dominance, while Jaime bucks his legs and hips beneath her to gain some leverage, to somehow throw her off balance, off himself, whereas Brienne tries her best to keep his legs locked between hers.

“Looks almost as though we were fuckin’!” Jaime howls. Brienne is stunned for the fraction of a
second, but that is apparently enough for Jaime to kick her thigh aside to have a chance to twist his body around.

Brienne grinds her teeth as the back of her head hits the pebbled ground harshly, sending sparks of white light dancing before her eyes. Jaime now goes for her axe instead of the rope with which he meant to strangle her, seemingly having changed his mind. Brienne does the same as he did before, bucks her hips, pushes her legs against the Kingslayer as harshly as she can while keeping an iron grip on her axe.

If Brienne loses the axe, she will lose her life, that much is for sure.

“If you don’t fight back now, I will just leave – and leave you your life,” Jaime says through gritted teeth, nostrils flaring.

And for a moment, Brienne wonders if he really means to warn her so he doesn’t have to kill her, or if the Kingslayer only ever says so to catch her off-guard to grab her axe and ram it between her eyes to watch the life spill out of her along with her blood.

Brienne pushes her free hand against his jaw to tilt his head up, which has Jaime push against her grip with all force he can muster, his mouth distorted to an angry, feral snarl, the veins on his neck standing out from the strain.

Good.

Brienne waits a moment longer before releasing her hand abruptly, which has Jaime’s head still motion downwards, whereas Brienne lets her head shoot up to let her forehead willfully collide with his with a thud that echoes like a bell inside both their heads, leaving the two tumbling on the black and white edges of consciousness.

Jaime howls in pain, his upper body swaying back and forth from the impact of the blow. And while Brienne finds her mind blackening out by the edges, too, she wastes no time to punch the Kingslayer in the jaw to knock him off to the side, and scramble across the ground to straddle him, now with axe in hand, right by his throat, drawing blood there. Jaime’s eyes are wide with shock, blinking rapidly as blood seeps down from his forehead, pooling by his nose, to roll down the side of his face.

It takes Brienne a few seconds to realize that Jaime is holding up his cuffed hands in surrender, his mouth unable to form the words, too busy with panting. Brienne keeps the axe by his throat as she slowly moves off of him, her mind twisting and turning as she does.

“You are mad, you know that?” Jaime asks between ragged breaths. “Who in her right mind… crashes her head against another’s like that?! You could’ve broken both our skulls, you dumb bitch!”

He screws his eyes shut, leaning back with a pained groan. “Maybe you did. Gods!”

“You do… what’s necessary to… survive,” Brienne says, licking her lips, only now realizing that her lips taste of the copper of her own blood as it seeps down her face.

Even if that means risking your head.

Once Brienne stands on shaky legs, and looks at the heap of a man on the ground, she sees that while this taught her to never underestimate the Kingslayer’s wickedness, he is also only just a human that bleeds.

No matter how much he tries to appear as an unbeatable monster, an unspoken horror, even the Kingslayer can be brought to fall with a thick skull.
The sense of danger starts to wash out of Brienne the longer she looks at the man before her. She bends down to grab Jaime by the collar to pull him up, which almost has her keel over herself.

*Maybe that was not the smartest idea after all,* the young woman thinks to herself, and only to herself. *Though what other choice did I have?*

Once both stand on shaky legs, Brienne pushes the Kingslayer ahead of her, her axe against his neck, not caring if she draws more blood along the way.

“**You make one more wrong move, and I will behead you,**” she snarls in a low voice.

Jaime says nothing at that, but simply starts walking, or rather *staggering,* seemingly having understood that this is not a fight he can win anymore, and that Brienne may well follow through with the threat right at this moment, now that he gave her any reason to swing the axe. The two limp the rest of the way, which seems to be an incredibly long distance for that it is factually not really. Brienne fears she may pass out every now and then as they swing to left or right too fast. Her skull pulsates under ever step, and the taste of copper on her tongue makes her nauseous.

However, she can’t allow for that weakness to show. While Jaime seems fairly out of it himself after that blow, Brienne knows by now that she cannot rely on that for only just a second. Or else he might get the better of her this time for real and manage to kill her.

At last, they climb the steps, if shakily so, and make their way inside.

“**What… what happened?**” Selwyn shouts once he sees the two stumble through the door.

“**He wanted to escape,**” Brienne says, one eye screwed shut as she drags Jaime along. “**I kept him from it.**”

She tries her best to keep upright now as she walks over to her father, who is already standing by the table.

“**If you could…**” she says, holding out the leash to him. The jarl takes it at once, giving it a sharp tug to force Jaime back on his chair, though the Kingslayer really *falls* on it this time.

If wordlessly, and isn’t that oh too sweet?

“**Sit down, too,**” Selwyn urges her. “**I have to take a good look at your wounds.**”

“**Shouldn’t be too deep. I just need to wash off the blood first,**” Brienne argues, already motioning over to the basin, her feet barely leaving the ground. She just has to get the blood off, she has to get the taste off of her tongue. She has to get it off herself, away from herself. That is the only thing Brienne can think of right at this moment, that the blood has to go.

“I should have you executed for this,” Selwyn snarls at Jaime, who only rolls his shoulders.

“Do it if you must… but it will mean the execution of all your men. Because my father will find out. And you know it, Jarl,” Jaime tells him, his jaw moving sluggishly, the words falling from his mouth like fresh droplets of blood.

Brienne’s father gives Jaime a sharp look that falls flat on the Kingslayer as he keeps trying to regain his focus, blinking, tilting his head, blinking again, searching for a fixed point he doesn’t seem to find as his mind is still reeling from the impact of the blow.

“I think… we have to find some other way to deal with him… for when I get the water… He almost
had me there,” Brienne says slowly, splashing water at her face, which has the basin turn red as the water mixes with her blood. “Well, just almost.”

“I should have kept him,” Selwyn says, his voice full of anguish.

“That’s not what I meant to say… I should… leave him in the pen for when I go get the water. That’s the one occasion where I don’t have my hands free,” Brienne argues. “It was my fault for… for not thinking of it.”

And at last, the copper is gone from her tongue, and Brienne feels a little less nauseous as a result.

“We can worry about that later,” Selwyn argues, to which she nods her head wordlessly. That is true. Because she has no intention of going back up the hill any time soon. Brienne grabs a stripe of linen, which she usually has there for when she cuts herself around the kitchen, to press to her forehead, irritated at her hands shaking as much as they currently do.

That is aftershock of fear, Brienne reminds herself. Because I could have died right there, and all that for not paying attention to all but one detail.

The last time she felt those waves crushing inside herself, shaking her to the core, Brienne was on a wooden boat that smelled of fear, death, and burned flesh, behind her nothing but endless green set ablaze, rocking back and forth in the tide meant to carry them all to an uncertain future far away.

“Did you sincerely knock your head against his?” Selwyn asks with a grimace forming on his face.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Jaime agrees, his words more of a drunken lull now. “Who does that, right?!?”

“It worked, did it not?” Brienne argues to her father, to then retort to Jaime, “And no one allowed you to speak.”

“Don’t stretch your luck any further, Kingslayer,” her father warns him.

“Apologies,” Jaime mutters, leaning his head to the other side, seemingly hoping that this will ease the dizziness out of him.

“Your apologies mean nothing,” she tells him. “Just like your promises mean nothing.”

Jaime steals a glance at her with an expression Brienne cannot put. Though it’s probably only just the dizziness that makes him look pensive about her words. Because this just now proved that he cares nothing about her as a person, and will kill her in a heartbeat if only given a chance.

Brienne looks down herself, only to let out a groan, her sleeves are bloodied thanks to her hands having gotten some scratches during the downfall, and blood also dribbled down on the front of her dress thanks to the small cut on her forehead, soiling the cloth now, too.

Two dresses within a few days!

There is no way of denying it – the Kingslayer destroys everything.

“Great, now I have to go change, too,” Brienne grumbles. She turns around to make her way into her room, though apparently with more confidence than her body allows for, since blackness spreads across her eyes the moment she makes the first step forward, tearing her to the ground.

Brienne mentally prepares herself to crash to the ground as ungracefully as ever, and the pain that
will come with, but there is no crash, no thud, neither does the pain come to her as she expected. It takes her a few more moments to hush some of the darkness clouding her vision away, but once she manages, she is bound to stare at Jaime’s bloodied face above her, looking at her with what Brienne would think of as concern if she didn’t know better after he tried to kill her mere minutes ago.

Only now does Brienne notice that he caught her before she could fall, even while in chains, dizzy himself, and likely on the verge of passing out the same way.

Her father stands by the table, eyes wide in shock, seemingly fearing for the worst that Jaime will now mean to strangle her or what not.

“Help her straighten up already!” Jaime almost barks at the older man.

Selwyn moves around the table at once to grab Brienne by the broad shoulders to help her stand. Her father looks over at Jaime for a long moment, who lifts his cuffed hands at him to show that he means no ill, at least for now.

“You can let go now, Father,” Brienne says after a few moments. “It’s fine.”

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“Yes, I am sure,” she reassures him. “I need to get out of these clothes, please.”

Selwyn walks a few steps with her, but Brienne finds steadiness once she can grab on to the wall, so the jarl lets her scramble to her room, slowly, very slowly, before retreating to his seat across the Kingslayer.

Jaime studies him the whole time.

“… I will be sleeping out in the muddy pen tonight, won’t I?” Jaime asks, wrinkling his nose, wincing at the discomfort the movement gives him.

“Not just for tonight,” Selwyn tells him, his face expressionless. Jaime screws one eye shut with a grimace. “I already feared you were going to say that.”

The jarl lets out a shaky breath. “You will keep trying that, won’t you?”

“As I already told your daughter… imprisonment is not part of man’s nature, even less so is it mine,” Jaime says, looking to the side, licking his lips, frowning at the taste of his blood on his tongue. “But if it is you any comfort… you raised an able shieldmaiden. Most other men would have been dead by now.”

Selwyn says nothing to that.

“So you give me the silent treatment now, too?” he sighs. “Seems to be a family trait.”

When there is no reply coming from the jarl, the Kingslayer nods his head slowly, even though it apparently makes him only dizzier.

“Well… I guess I had that one coming,” he concludes, moving his tongue inside his bloodied mouth, frowning at the taste.

And yet again, no answer comes from the older man.

“Oh yes… and sorry for the animals for not getting their drink now. Apologies to…,” Jaime says, before his head smacks against the table in front of him as he passes out.
“What happened?” Brienne asks, still in her own chamber, after she heard the loud thud ring all the way to her room.

Her father gets up from his seat to check on Jaime, lifting his head slightly by pulling on his hair. “He lost consciousness!”

Brienne stands still for a moment, her lips curling into a frown.

“Maybe we should keep him like that until the althing takes place!” Brienne says as she pulls a fresh tunic over her head, careful not to get fresh blood on it.

“Maybe.”

Brienne slowly makes her way back, mindful of her steps this time. Because she doesn’t fancy falling over a second time. Well, almost falling over, for the matter.

Once she reaches the kitchen, she takes a good look at Jaime’s still form.

It must have been reflex that he caught her.

Nothing but reflex. Why else would he have done it after he meant to kill me minutes earlier?

The rest of him is wickedness and the ability as well as the strive to kill her if Brienne gives him the chance. There is no longer any doubt after that just happened. If this experience taught her anything, then it is that she cannot trust the Kingslayer.

At all. Ever.

The only thing Brienne can trust in with regards to him are his reflexes – and how to take advantage of them if she must. Because, for now, she cannot rely on her routines, even, cannot rely on the steadiness they used to grant her. At least for now.

As for the rest, Brienne only has herself to rely on.

“And now sit down so that I can take care of your wounds,” Selwyn says.

“Yes, Father.”

Her and her father.
Jaime is bound in more than one way, still walking on a leash while at the same time bound to follow along wherever Brienne is going, whether he wants to or not, even if it is just to the village below to watch her train the little shieldmaidens in the making.

Though things take a sudden turn when he is approached by an old woman, which may force him to see things from another perspective.

Hello everyone, thanks for sticking around and being so kind to leave me a kudo or a comment. It really helps me reduce my anxiety of posting that fic - and that you bear with me against the odds of much artistic freedom in favor of historical accuracy, LOL.

Anyway, it's finally time to get into Jaime's head! Woop!

As said in the A/N in the first chapter, the issue of shieldmaidens being a thing or not being a thing historically is something I sideline for the sake of having it set in Westeros, so in Westeros, there are shieldmaidens, depending on what clan you are talking about.

I hope you are going to enjoy.

Jaime is relieved that, at last, the wench took him back into the house.

Three nights in the muddy, cold pen taught Jaime that if he wants to escape, he has to make it work at once and be gone before anyone can catch up with him, or else his bones will kill him, if the wench doesn’t do it with her stares full of misgiving.

Ever since that little incident on the way back from the well, their relationship has been strained, shall he say? Which is little wonder, Jaime supposes, granted that he may or may not have tried to murder her. However, to his defense, it’s not like Jaime didn’t tell her often enough, so the wench can’t act as though it came without a fair warning first. Brienne would save herself – and him – a lot of trouble if she just let him go. Because Jaime has no intention of staying here. He has no intention of staying a prisoner for any longer than he must or at all.

He is needed elsewhere, back at the Rock, his home, his family.

Even the wench should be able to understand that, as fond as she is of her father.

Though Jaime is not looking forward to getting back home – already for the sole reason that Tyrion
will never let him see the end of it for getting imprisoned by some inexperienced lads.

And for a wench to put me on a leash like a bloody dog! Tyrion won’t ever stop giggling, or may literally die of laughter.

Yet, Tyrion will likely be the least of his problems. The far more pressing issue will prove to be his father – as he always does. After all, he was the one who sent him here to fulfill that oh so great purpose, that oh so great mission. There is one thing Jaime can tell with surety already: Once he is to return to Casterly Rock, there will be no concern in his father’s eyes as he welcomes him back, but only ever disappointment for not having achieved the task. After all, Jaime is supposed to get everything done because he is his first son, his perfect heir, if not for his many imperfections that Tywin generously glosses over in comparison to Jaime’s siblings.

Of that one thing Jaime is certain, he will never see in his father’s gaze what Brienne gets to see reflecting in Jarl Selwyn’s blue orbs as his eyes keep racing until they find her when she was gone too long, was injured – particularly thanks to a certain Kingslayer – or is otherwise hurt. Because Jarl Tywin is many things, but not a man known for his fierce love for his children or apparent care for their wellbeing beyond being well enough to fulfill their purposes to serve the empire the man has built over the years. His father never should have sent Jaime out to fulfill that foolish task. For a man the likes of Tywin Lannister, that whole mission was all but a travesty at best.

Just because the seer foretold it doesn’t make it true! He should know! He was the one who taught me that in the first place! And yet, here I am, following a false call for a true purpose, and all that to keep the peace somehow, anyhow!

It’s still beyond Jaime that Tywin entrusted the task into his care, after all the great speeches his father gave about how he is his son, his first son, the one to continue his empire, his legacy. Though the patriarch would like to add “only son” to the list, if not for that dwarfish offspring with sharp tongue of his who is more like him than Tywin Lannister would ever care to admit.

But that seems to be the thing – what you gain in power, you lose in love.

Well, if I never get away from here, you’d have no choice but to try to make your hated son, the Imp, the next Jarl of the Rock– what would you say about that, Father? Hm?

“It is all of that really necessary?” Jaime asks, looking back at the wicked wolf of hers, the one Brienne already ordered to bite off his cock when he came to stay here for the first time, who now sits right beside Jaime, only inches from his face.

“Absolutely,” Brienne replies, standing in his back.

The wench won’t leave him even less out of sight than she did before, at least ever since she let him back into the house. Before that, the woman was busying herself around the house almost constantly, seemingly making a sport of it to show him how much she gets to move around while he remained bound to that damned pole outside. The healing cut on Brienne’s forehead was and is all but a constant reminder of that little incident, almost glaring at Jaime the more often she passed him by on her way to and away from the barn, because he somehow started to feel bad about it, but only just a bit. After all, he now has one as well, so they are even on that, and she should stop wordlessly punishing him for it, right?

Jarl Selwyn went out in the morning very early, to do some jarl’s business around town, which left Jaime with the Wench’s Wrath as she glowered at him while he did nothing but eat his rye bread in silence, as though that was a crime now, too.
That they always have to be so vindictive for one little murder attempt!

At some point after breakfast, Brienne told him to come to her chamber, or rather, just dragged him along before Jaime had any chance to object, sat him on the ground, and called for her beast to come sit beside him – and bite off his face if he dared to try to make for the door.

“What are we up to today anyway?” Jaime asks, finding that whole situation about as irritating as it is boring, because the wall is not at all interesting enough to keep him occupied for what feels like half an hour already.

“You will find out once you find out,” is the answer he gets, but didn't want. “All in due time.”

“So, you are not talking to me in any significant way anymore?” he sighs.

Ever since that day by the well, the wench’s hardly spoken a word to him, beside bellowing out orders, calling him Kingslayer, and growling at him on occasion, sounding more like a bear than a woman. While Brienne doesn’t seem to be very intent on making conversation with him anyway, which stands to reason of course, she has only grown muter around him ever since that incident, which drives Jaime more insane than really it should.

*Because why should I bother?!!*

Jaime knows it shouldn’t concern him. He prides himself not giving a damn on what people think of him. He brushes it off, he lets it all wash over him, ever since he was called Kingslayer for the first time. He got used to people turning their backs on him to only ever speak about him instead of to him. However, with the wench, Jaime found himself ever the more irritated at her silence. It makes her judging glances ever the more stabbing, sharper than any knife he’s ever felt sink into his flesh.

And Jaime hates it, hates it, hates it.

“You enjoy talking to yourself anyway,” Brienne tells, keeping her voice leveled.

“If that is still about what happened by the well…,” Jaime means to say, but Brienne cuts him off. “Sun.”

The beast growls at him at once, moving closer to Jaime’s face, so he can feel the hot breath against his cheek, and notice the bad breath as the animal comes closer and closer.

“Call that thing back already!” Jaime yells.

He can hear Brienne move her arm behind his back, which seems to be enough to make the beast snarl at him, only to then lick across his face.

“Bah!” Jaime curses. “Dog slobber!”

“You can be lucky he only wanted a kiss and not a bite,” Brienne tells him, and Jaime can hear the wicked smirk.

*Damn her!*

“You ordered him to do it, did you not?” he yells.

Yet again, there is no reply coming from the wench, and Jaime finds himself growling at that. While he doesn’t take the woman to be a great sort of tactician, Jaime starts to believe that, *at the very least*, Brienne seems to have found one weak spot of his to attack – which is to treat him with silence.
While it is certainly not enough to ensure that Jaime will not escape or kill her, he reckons it’s enough to repay him for some of his japes.

Maybe not only Lannister always pay their debts, but also annoying wenches.

Speaking of…

Jaime turns his head slowly, wrinkling his nose as he can feel the dog spit dry on his skin, to catch a glimpse of the woman with flaxen hair, who is apparently busy pulling a tunic over her head, which gives Jaime a first idea of what she looks like beneath the layers of wool and misgiving. And Jaime must say, that toned stomach is nothing to sneeze at. It leaves him wondering if there are other not at all ungainly bits to that tall woman who may even put giantess Angrboða to shame.

Brienne sticks her head through the tunic, instantly catching his eyes before Jaime can turn away.

“Eyes to the front!” she curses. Jaime turns back around, grumbling, only to let out a yell of pain when she steps over to smack him across the back of the head.

“I didn’t see anything!” he curses, to which she only ever slaps him again, harder.

“What was that for?” Jaime pouts, though then he can deduce that the wench thinks he meant that there is nothing nice to look at because she is ugly. And while she is undoubtedly ugly, Jaime didn’t mean to point to that right now.

Though of course, it makes no difference now. Even if I were to correct my words, she wouldn’t hear me. No one ever does.

“Keep your eyes to the front or else Sun will chew out your eyeballs,” Brienne threatens him.

“I can’t imagine that this is what he likes to eat,” Jaime argues, studying the direwolf in front of him. If he didn’t know that the wolf can very well turn into an angry beast ready to tear off his balls if the woman gave the order, Jaime would almost find the thing endearing, but really just almost.

“He likes it when they pop open,” Brienne informs him.

“I always knew you were the disgusting of the two,” Jaime huffs, looking at the red-eyed direwolf beside him, who looks far less threatening as he tilts his head at him almost curiously, certainly not making any sense of what Jaime says to him, but listening attentively anyway. Which is ridiculous in itself. He is now talking to a direwolf!

“Are you nearly done yet? This is about as boring as it is to suffer through your barking out orders,” Jaime sighs.

And yet again, no answer.

Oh, how Jaime loathes the wench for it!

“You could at least move up to the front so that I have something to look at. Like this, I can only see the dust on the wall,” Jaime goes on, hoping that this will provoke her back to reacting to him in some way at least. “I mean, it’d be much more entertaining if you undressed instead.”

But no reply yet again.

Jaime leans his head back with a groan.

“Eyes to the front!”
“I am looking at the ceiling, by Odin’s beard!” Jaime moans. “Cut me at least some slack, will you? Brienne answers, “I am not cutting you any slack again until we take you to the althing.”

“So that means during the althing you will cut me some slack? Would that mean that you’d lift your skirts for me, then? Or let me lift them for you?” he snickers.

“I don’t see what one has to do with the other,” Brienne snaps.

“Well, once you cut me some slack, you will be more loosened up, and not as tight as a bowstring as you usually are. Needless to mention that I would be no longer your prisoner, but a respectable jarl’s son. You should feel honored to lift your skirts for me, then,” Jaime explains. “Not many are entitled to that spear.”

He feels another slap to the back of his hand as she moves to the front of him.

“Sorry, no skirt to lift,” Brienne huffs, and indeed there is none, since she is clad in her fighting clothes, woolen breeches in a muddy sort of blue, high boots, the linen shirt Jaime already caught a glimpse of as he turned, a leather vest and leather cuffs for her forearms.

“That means you let me get some exercise?” Jaime asks with a grin. “I mean, if you want me to train you, you will have to untie me, or else I cannot teach you properly.”

“No, that means I am taking you with while I fulfill my duties.”

“It’s been ages since I held a sword in hand,” Jaime groans. “I need it like air!”

“And it’ll take only a few more moons until you can fondle your sword again,” Brienne scoffs, though she realizes at once that this was an unsmart thing to say to Jaime of all people, whose grin spreads to ridiculousness at once.

“Oh, fondle it? Wench, how daring of you to use such filthy words! I mean, if you are jealous of my sword, you are always welcome to let me fondle your breasts or cunt, maybe both, whichever I get my fingers on first,” Jaime laughs. “Well, on or in.”

But again, no reply, not even a scowl. Instead, Brienne pulls him up by the collar with way too little effort for a woman, before dragging him back to the kitchen.

Brienne’s chamber – kitchen – the pit to take a piss – kitchen – muddy pen for when she gets the water – kitchen again – Brienne’s chamber. Repeat.

For that the woman proves to be quite adaptable in a fight, managing to momentarily overpower Jaime even in a fight that came out of the blue for her – because she was not beating him, she is quite stuck on her daily routines as though her life depended on their fulfillment alone. And as a result, Jaime finds himself caught up in just those routines, the same paths, over and over, making him feel even more like a prisoner than he is anyway.

Jaime feels like he is developing cabin fever, as though his world shrunk to not even that small village, but only just that house.

Brienne busies herself with something he can’t see from where he stands in the small kitchen. And yet again, without telling him anything, the minx.

That woman is always busy with something. Preparing food, tending to the animals, milking the cow, getting the hens’ eggs, carrying buckets of water back and forth and back again, down to the
village for some balm for her father’s bad leg, up the hill to see after the direwolves, down the village
to bring some woman called Maggy rye bread, up the hill again, preparing dinner, washing clothes,
repairing tears in the fabric – particularly after a certain fight with him, down the hill to see some girls
she keeps mentioning, too, then eat with her father, see about the house, dust, wash, dust, then look
after the beasts again, check on the animals another time, tidy up before everyone retires to bed, and
all the while smacking Jaime, scowling at him, bossing him around, and giving him every ounce of
misgiving she has in her body.

And that doesn’t even mention anything she does for herself or by herself – because Jaime’s never
seen it, really. Like washing herself or Gods know what else that woman manages to do for her own
sake within a day.

Jaime always considered himself a man of action, but that woman adds a whole new dimension to
the term. Because Brienne makes it sound like the entire cosmos would come to collapse if she didn’t
do all those things, day in, day out, as though the whole world rested upon her fulfilling her duties.

As though the world rested only just on her broad shoulders.

“I thought we were running late or so?” he asks, cocking an eyebrow at her.

“No, we are just on time,” Brienne says, turning around to walk towards him. “I started early in case
you’d do something stupid.”

“So you already schedule your day, anticipating every of my movements? It’d seem that you
organize your life around me already, woman. And we didn’t even climb under the furs just yet to
celebrate that holy union,” Jaime croons, only to start to frown when something wet presses against
his nose and eyes, momentarily blinding him. It takes him about two seconds to realize that she
presses a wet cloth to her face, scrubbing off the dog spit.

“I suppose I owe you my thanks for it. I wouldn’t have fancied to walk around with that
sort of war paint for the rest of the day. Though I may have to inform you that your mutt has a very bad breath,”
Jaime tells her.

Brienne says nothing, just takes the cloth away again to wash out. Jaime turns his head back,
swinging back and forth on his feet because of the growing frustration bubbling up deep in the pit of
his stomach.

“... Will you forgive me if I were to apologize for that incident by the well?” he asks, looking at the
ceiling.

“Why would I forgive you for trying to kill me?” she huffs, not even looking at him.

“Because even you should see it’s quite natural for someone to mean to escape imprisonment,” Jaime
tells her.

She would do the same thing!

You do what is necessary in order to survive. You do what is necessary for your people to survive. If
that means killing a King or a Jarl’s daughter, then that is so.

Right?

“Well, maybe you should see that it’s quite unnatural to wish to escape if he was the one who
suggested staying until the althing takes place to return in one piece, and perhaps not nearly as badly
treated as you currently suffer through it thanks to your own actions,” Brienne points out to him, still
not turning towards him, though Jaime is certain that she only busies herself with something so that she doesn’t have to glance at him.

“So you admit at least that you don’t treat me well,” Jaime concludes.

“I don’t think I have to treat someone well who was intent on killing me,” Brienne snorts. Jaime lets out a long sigh. “I want to be home, woman.”

She stops at that, which has Jaime believe that he struck a chord right there, though he’d have no clue just why that statement is the one that has her blink at him with her big blue eyes, which are ever the more beautiful, compared to the rest of her which is… not really beautiful.

Though Jaime has to give her that much: She has beautiful eyes, and a nice, flat stomach, apparently.

“You will be home. Two moons from now, unless I kill you first. That is up to you,” Brienne tells him, rolling her wrist in his direction.

Jaime wrinkles his nose. He can still see the healing cuts from the pebbles that made a mess of both her hands, just like the cut on her forehead has not yet faded, like his own. And a small fraction of him, but only a very small fraction, feels somewhat bad for it.

“So, couldn’t we agree on a truce or so?” Jaime goes onto suggest, which has her let out a dry laugh as though the mere thought was utterly ridiculous.

“You need trust to have a truce, and I have no reason to trust you,” she tells him, seemingly taking that very serious just now.

“Stands to reason, I suppose,” Jaime answers, rolling his shoulders, trying to ease some of the tension out of the situation.

“You suppose rightly, then,” Brienne says, now finished up with whatever she thought she had to get done. “So now, we should be on our way, unless you would rather be tied up at the pen again. I can always arrange for that?”

“Not the pen!” Jaime whines.

“That’s what I thought.”

“I will say this, having slept out in that muddy pen made me realize that it’s far less horrible to be bound to sleep next to you snoring,” Jaime grumbles.

Though Brienne doesn’t snore, really. Jaime thought she would sound like a bear with a sneeze, but Brienne is a very silent sleeper for all he can tell, which made his night’s rest a lot more bearable, despite the ropes she uses to tie him up with every damn night. Not that he is going to let her know that, however.

Obviously.

“See, you learn after all, if very slowly,” Brienne tells him.

Jaime grins at her. “It’s lovely when you try to be funny.”

Brienne shakes her head as she pulls him outside, giving the leash a sharp tug, seemingly to throw him off-balance, but Jaime adapted to her movements by now. The woman should make no mistake. She is not the only one observing his every move.
And so, down the hill we go!

Jaime hopes for some action at last. The last time he saw the village, he got kicked, clubbed, and beaten around as the stupid youths kept parading him through the streets as though Jaime was a duck with two heads or so, a thing of scandal, a thing of wonder.

But perhaps the village itself is not as bad as it proved to be during his first visit. One can never know.

No matter what, it will most certainly help ease some of his cabin fever, so Jaime will be sure not to complain too much, or else the wench won’t ever take him along again.

 Needless to mention that he has to be nice enough to her for a while so that she takes him along again. Or else he will never get another chance to escape this village of madness.

Eventually, they reach the small town, which is tiny compared to the place Jaime grew up at, or spent parts of his youth at, or rather, had them destroyed.

The Rock is very much different from all of this, as is King’s Landing. Everything is bigger in these places, the longhouses are longer, the sidewalks are broader, his father’s house reaches higher into the sky, even the banners seem to hang higher above the ground.

And the noises. Jaime never knew how many different sounds there are at Casterly Rock until he came to this place, where cicadas ring louder than voices carry up the hill. Suddenly, the world seems much quieter, when he was very much used to a life in a blur of noises and voices. Or perhaps it seems even louder now because his attention is called to the rustling of leaves and the cracking of the fireplace, when he didn’t pay attention to that for most of that he can remember.

“Will you tell me at last just where we are going?” Jaime asks as they make their way towards the village.

“To the beach,” she declares.

“You didn’t have to dress only just to jump into the water there!”

Brienne gives the leash a tug to cut off another comment on the tip of his tongue.

That confirms it. They are most definitely not on good terms again. If they ever were in the first place, that is.

Jaime looks around as they come to see the first people passing them by. Though he can’t remember any of them, so either they weren’t present when he was paraded through the streets, or they just faded from Jaime’s memory because they mean nothing in the world at large.

An old man with gray hair and a full beard, walking with a cane, minding only his own business, not even taking notice of Brienne and the man she has on a leash as he crosses over to the other side.

A woman who is roughly twice as old as Jaime reckons Brienne to be, with a lumpy nose and a round stomach, takes a good look at the two of them from top to bottom once, twice, only to give Jaime what he can only ever identify as the evil eye, hissing as she turns her head and goes on.

Jaime frowns at that. The last gesture was not directed at him, really, he is fairly sure of that, but rather at Brienne.

If someone were to do the same thing with Jaime over at the Rock, his father would have that
woman be whipped or killed, if not both, because no one is to speak disrespectfully of Jarl Tywin’s sons other than himself.

Which seems to be the one thing the old man concerns himself with these days!

It’s only ever about the appearance, the name, the prestige, the reputation, all that it takes for people to believe the Lannisters to be something they are not. But Brienne is a jarl’s child, too, like Jaime, and while certainly not as influential as she would be if she were to bear the Lannister name, surely important enough to her clan that people should feel obliged to pay her the basic respect, if not more.

The woman with lumpy nose should have at least had the courtesy to greet Brienne and some sort of acknowledgement of the Jarl’s only daughter.

Though maybe that is their kind of relationship, Jaime thinks to himself. They seem rather close around here anyway, so perhaps it was a jest? In Casterly Rock, I don’t know much of anybody beside my kin.

They take a turn to the left, where there are more people roaming the narrow, trampled down paths, seemingly on the way to the small marketplace further down what Jaime assumes to be the main street.

Jaime is not surprised by the glances they are rewarded with as the people catch sight of the Kingslayer on a leash. He is even less surprised by the whispers and mutters soon evading his ears, but he remains irritated at the eyes following Brienne, and the mouths moving in accordance to talk about her rather than him. At some point he can make out at least a few shreds of what they have to say about the Jarl’s daughter. Most of what travels to Jaime’s ears is about Brienne walking around Jaime like an animal, which he could not agree more to, but what leaves him somewhat baffled is that particularly the women keep commenting about her walking down the streets in that fashion. Which Jaime finds rather ridiculous, since Brienne is undoubtedly a shieldmaiden, where that is customary without a doubt. And while not every clan will have shieldmaidens, they have them here, for what it seems.

So what do they expect her to do? Fight in skirts and her finest garbs?

Though then again, Brienne can do even that, upon reflection.

If the wench hears any of the whispers, she makes good on not showing it as she walks on wordlessly, something Jaime reckons to be good, as he finds himself doing that more often than not himself.

“Is it really necessary to drag me through town while having me on a leash?” Jaime lament at some point. “I mean, even if I made a run for it, one of the villagers would instantly be there to throw himself at me.”

“The leash stays right where it is,” Brienne says, giving it a tug for emphasis.

“Would you knock that off? I am no dog!” he pouts.

But Brienne only gives the leash another tug, pulling him along as Jaime stumbles around to keep in balance. The man growls as he staggers after her, hearing the chuckles now directed at him more prominently, and hating the wench ever the more for it.

As though he didn’t have enough of this back home already. Because, no matter his name, people still whisper behind his back, they just know better to conceal it, fearing his father’s wrath to come upon them, were he to know that they make fun of his firstborn son. Jaime loathes it, with every
shred of his being, but he also knows that no matter his hatred, it won’t change anything. The whispers will outlast him.

The two walk past a group of youngsters. Jaime can recognize two of them instantly, the two except the fat guy who brought him to Jarl Selwyn.

*Probably eating more to get even fatter, that one.*

“Look at that! She’s gotten herself a pet lion!” one of them calls out as they walk on, though Jaime can’t remember that lad.

*He looks particularly dumb, though, that much I can say.*

“Only way’s she going to put a leash on a man, aye?” another says, who looks equally oafish.

“Pet lion?!” Jaime means to object, but Brienne cuts him off, “You sincerely want to have a quarrel with a lad about what he calls you?”

“I am a lion, no *pet* lion. There is a difference in that,” Jaime insists, stomping one foot for emphasis.

Brienne is having none of it, though, and instead drags him along, away from the lads feeling smart for having made such a grandeur jape. However, the “pet lion” seems to catch fire fast. By the time the two reach the marketplace, almost *everyone* refers to Jaime that way. They wade through the crowd that starts to gather to apparently get a glimpse of the pet lion of a Kingslayer, on a leash.

Jaime grinds his teeth as he goes on, keeping his head held high the best he can with the chain around his neck, which he knows will not help him in any way, but at least it gives him a private feeling of dignity even the giggles and chuckles cannot douse.

By the time they leave the marketplace, Jaime can hear the name Kingslayer more often than pet lion, which he assumes is something he should appreciate, but finds himself unable to. It is the name Jaime accepted along with shit for honor for having slain his King, but he hates that name nonetheless, hates it with all of his heart, however much remained of it after he shoved a sword through Aerys’ back.

He wished he could cut that bit out of himself, like inflamed, infected skin, but he cannot. The sick skin is too close to his heart, and no hot iron can burn out that wound to stop the constant bleeding.

Most people tend to think that being called a name often enough takes the edge away at some point, but Jaime never felt the blades go blunt, really, no matter how much time has passed since he thrust the sword through Aerys’ back. If at all, he grew ever the more frustrated the more he accustomed to being referred to that in only just that way. He is no longer Jaime Lannister, no matter how often he introduces and his introduced with just that name, but only ever known as the Kingslayer.

What he did grew to mean the same as who he is. At least everyone else seems to believe that, and that is what Jaime hates so much about it. For this one act they refer to him in that way, think of him in only just that way. But Jaime is more than that, he was more than that, and yet… they somehow manage to take the content out of him, the meaning, leaving only just the stigma tattooed onto his skin.

*Kingslayer.*

*Oathbreaker.*

*Man without honor.*
Similarly, Jaime learned over the years that the cutting edge of that name slides even deeper into his flesh when the person saying it is someone he knows well, or at least got to know better than some stranger. Thus, Brienne’s overuse of the name has him going nearly mad with fury and writhing thanks to a sort of pain he cannot allow to show on his face, because then people like Brienne were to know of his weakness.

And he can’t allow for weakness to show.

Men don’t show weakness.

Warriors don’t.

Even less so if they are born to Jarl Tywin.

Even less so Kingslayers.

The sad thing is that no matter how well he manages to hold up the façade, Jaime is still bound to suffer through the pain that name comes with, is bound to continue bleeding – for no one to see, for no one to stop it.

And doesn’t that make me just like Father? Jaime thinks to himself bitterly. Only ever out for protecting a name, a reputation?

Eventually, they come to the beach Brienne pointed him to. It’s small, only a comparably thin strip of white sand before it ebbs into the water of the fjord.

And on the beach are who Jaime assumes to be Brienne’s girls. Young shieldmaiden in the making, clad in similar fashion, though still looking womanlier in them than Brienne ever could. Which is likely the reason why the women direct their evil glances not so much at those young girls, but Brienne instead, because they still look womanish enough.

People are ridiculous like that.

“You won’t let them train on me, will you?” Jaime asks, tilting his head to the side.

“I don’t think you’d survive that,” Brienne huffs. “They have gotten pretty good with the wooden swords as of late.”

While Jaime is not happy to be dragged around on a leash, he finds himself even less pleased with being tied to some damned pole he is sure was only ever put up for that purpose, leaving him with no way to escape or slip away, and leaving him to every villager passing by to look at him as though he was a lion in a cage.

Though that is precisely what I am, huh?

That still doesn’t change anything about the fact that Jaime would rather not be tied to a pole for all to see. Jaime is just glad for it that his father will never know of any of this, that he is shamed in that way. Because there is no way he will hear it unless Jaime were to tell him, and by Odin, Jaime would rather die than admit that shame. Though he remains certain that those shameful truths will never reach across the fjord before him, because this town is by far too unimportant for Jarl Tywin to even seen from his throne, which is no throne.

What is perhaps the one true consolation in being tied to the pole in the sand is that there is no mud, and it’s not as cold as his bed was for the last couple of nights. So it’s better than the muddy pen behind Brienne’s home by far.
Jaime tries to focus his attention on something else, so Brienne training the young shieldmaidens may be a better way to distract himself than trying to shut out people’s laughter and misgiving.

*If only they knew, if only they all knew about Aerys and…*

“Shield, Solveig!” Brienne shouts at one of two girls currently doing a mock duel with wooden swords.

Jaime turns his attention to the wench lecturing the young girl who seems to be quite a hotspur, lunging at the sturdier blonde girl with shield still raised.

*She looks like a know-it-all, though she likely does not know much at all, Jaime thinks to himself.*

He tilts his head in curiosity when Brienne stops the young woman whose name is seemingly Solveig from the attack before she can even bring down her wooden sword on the blonde girl’s shield. Brienne catches the wooden stick between her long fingers as though it was nothing, and that even though Jaime can imagine that it must cause her some sort of discomfort, with her hands still more of a mess after their fight.

“I was about to attack!” Solveig shouts, anger and frustration spreading across her features. Brienne releases the wooden sword, which the young girl snaps back with a snarl.

*She seems to take after her teacher, Jaime muses to himself.*

“You let your guard down. You are to be a shieldmaiden, Solveig. That means you need to keep your shield high at all times,” Brienne lectures her.

“I would be far quicker without it!” the girl laments. “I would have hit Hillevi in the side! In a fight, this would have meant my victory! Like this, I only ever remain in the defense, never attack!”

“You wouldn’t have because *Hillevi* kept up her shield,” Brienne tells her.

“But the men don’t always have shield either, and they still end up winning!” Solveig argues stubbornly.

“And you will eventually learn to fight without a shield, too, for when you have to fight without, but as the shieldmaidens you are foremost meant to be, you have to learn *that* before everything else, Solveig.”

“You can’t fight with a shield like you can with a sword!” the young woman with fire in her eyes retorts. “You should be teaching us *that* instead!”

“Can’t you?” Brienne asks, tilting her head to the side, folding her muscular arms over her flat chest. “Can’t you fight with a shield?”

“Not like with a sword, no!”

Brienne lets out a long sigh, licks her lips, then turns her head towards the other shieldmaiden. “Hillevi? Give me your shield, please.”

The blonde girl hands the round wooden disk over to her. Brienne hooks her arm through the leather strap there, twisting her fingers a few times. Jaime can’t help the small grin. You can just see how her body feels the familiarity at once, how her body is aching for the crunch and feel of the leather.

Jaime knows that himself, he knows that song of the blood, and how you can’t seem to stop yourself
from wanting it even though you hate it, even though it will mean your death.

He is pulled out of his thoughts when Brienne raises her voice again, “Everyone! Stop fighting for a moment! This is a new lesson!”

The remaining young shieldmaidens look up, abandoning their tasks, to walk over to Brienne and young Solveig, a circle forming around them.

“Solveig, you can attack however you please. I don’t require you to use your shield.”

The young woman looks at her rather stunned.

“Don’t hold back. Use whatever power and might you have in your body. I will use nothing but my shield.”

“But…” The young woman frowns at her, stunned.

“You want to prove to me that one cannot fight with shield as one can with sword. Now is your time to prove it,” Brienne tells her.

“Fine!”

The two go into position. And Jaime finds himself wanting to know what the wench means to show the girl exactly. He has a hunch, but the execution may surprise him after all. That fight by the well taught Jaime one thing – the woman has her own peculiar ways that catch even him off-guard.

Needless to mention that the woman has some very good moves. The bruises and cuts he got thanks to her taught him that by now, too.

So, young Solveig, what do you think will you achieve what I could not?

The young shieldmaiden starts dashing towards Brienne, and as she comes closer, twists to the side to cut through the older woman’s defense by attacking her side, believing herself at an advantage because Brienne’s shield is still aimed towards the front. And Jaime has to give her that much, the girl is fast on her feet.

To the brunette girl’s surprise – though not to Jaime’s – Brienne swings her shield back to follow her movement even without twisting her body around, which may have cost her valuable time otherwise. Brienne only ever has to slide her shield against Solveig’s wooden sword to push her away, breaking off the attack before it could ever come to bloom.

Solveig is sent staggering and falling into the sand when Brienne gives her no more than push with her shield, throwing her off-balance because she did not take a steady stance before lunging. The young girl tumbles to the ground, letting out a growl of frustration. The shieldmaiden in the making tears her head up when Brienne walks over to help her stand. Once she is set again, Brienne resumes her position a few feet away from her, raising her shield.

“Try again!” Brienne orders, and the girl seems only more fueled now as she starts to run up to Brienne. The girl seemingly has confidence, sliding with her knees over the ground to slap her sword against Brienne’s lower legs before she can move her heavy shield there to dodge.

But not so with the wench.

Brienne’s arms cut down like the sharpest of knives, moving the shield to the ground as though it was made of thin linen and not heavy oak. She rams the shield into the sand, sending the kernels to
fly through the air.

Before Solveig can even react, Brienne put her heel on the sword, keeping her from pulling it back. The wench pushes the shield back to knock against the young woman’s shoulder – though Jaime knows that in a sincere fight, Brienne would have aimed for the face to knock her unconscious – to throw her off-balance, and send her rolling over the sand. Brienne stalks over to Solveig and puts her leg across her chest and arms, successfully keeping the shieldmaiden in the training from using her hands to get free. The shield she raises above the young woman’s delicate throat.

Jaime smiles. He hasn’t ever seen a shieldmaiden quite like her, but for that Brienne is freakish tall, she can move as fast as a cat if she has to. Jaime fought alongside some many shieldmaidens during raids and while defending the Rock… and the King… but none of them had her style. It seems that her strong, muscular body allow the wench a kind of speed to her movements that most others lack.

If that means she has to look more mannish as a result, Jaime reckons it is well worth the price, considering that this will ensure Brienne’s survival one day.

“If I were to throw myself down on you with full weight now, I would crush your neck and you would be dead,” Brienne says, removing herself slowly, only to turn her attention to the girls who gathered around them, glancing at the two with huge eyes.

“We are shieldmaidens! But that doesn’t mean we are only there to defend those with swords, we know how to use our shields as swords! The shields have to become one with your body! They have to be an extension of your arm the same way the sword is supposed to be! Let your defenses fall, and your offense will falter with it! But so long you have your shield, you can win any fight!”

Jaime tilts his head to the side. He didn't think Brienne had it quite in her to give those sorts of speeches, as much as she silently scolds and growls most of her time.

“Yes!” the girls shout in unison.

Brienne then bends down to offer the girl her hand to help her stand once more, rewarding her with a small smile.

“Is everything alright?” Brienne asks. “I hope the blow was not too hard.”

“No, no. Thank you,” Solveig mutters, licking her lips. “You were right… about the shield.”

“You are here to learn,” Brienne tells her before she gives her a clap to the back. “Then go on and pick up your shield. Make sure not to lose it again.”

“Yes!” Solveig almost shouts before she runs ahead to gather the shield from where she left it lying in the sand. Brienne returns the other shield to Hillevi. “Thank you. Keep it up, you have a strong arm already. Now you have to learn how to wield the shield fast and effectively.”

Hillevi gives her a small smile before Solveig returns.

“Go on, go on! Everyone! Back to the duels! And always remember what you are!”

“Shieldmaidens!” the girls shout before they start to indulge in the mock battles again.

Jaime watches Brienne as she corrects them every once in a while, shows them how to hold the shield higher without having to strain the arm. He has to give Brienne that much – she is not halfway bad as a teacher, though it leaves him wondering who ever taught her those very arts. That fighting style is nothing like he’s seen it up until now.
So, who is your master, Brienne?

“It’s wonderful, is it not?” a woman’s voice rings out beside him. Jaime jumps as far as the ropes allow him to, only to catch sight of an old hag suddenly next to him, clad in a thick, dark, woolen robe hanging down her hunched features.

“You mean to say, old woman?” he asks, slowly easing back down, reckoning that the old woman won’t mean him harm, and even if she does, won’t succeed, now tied up or not.

“Oh, I love watching the girls train,” the hag cackles, sitting down next to him as though Jaime was not a threat to her – at all!

*Though then again, as tight as Brienne tied me to the pole, I am not really,* Jaime thinks to himself, sending an evil glare in the wench’s direction, though she doesn’t see it, busy with showing a girl how to move the wooden sword in a more effective way over and over until the young woman absorbed the movement into her body.

Jaime tilts his head as he takes a good look at the elder woman thereafter.

*The woman is blind as a gofer!*

“They’re not the almost bad,” Jaime says, tilting his head to the side.

“Not the almost bad? Ha!” the old woman snorts, letting out a dry laugh towards the end. Jaime can’t help but ask, to which the old hag does nothing much but cackle shrilly, clicking her tongue against her palate to flash her missing and rotten teeth at him. “Oh, Kingslayer, blind jokes, really? That is below you, even.”

Jaime laughs at that. “Might be.”

“It just sounds wrong when you say that you like hearing them train,” she goes on, waving around with her bony hand.

“Stands to reason, I’ll have to give you that, old woman,” Jaime is bound to agree, smirking softly. His eyes drift back to the shieldmaidens in the making, and the one fully-grown shieldmaiden standing out amongst them like a tree does in a rose patch.

And if it’s possible, the old hag knows right away that his eyes left her to look at Brienne and her girls instead. “The Jarl’s daughter teaches our young very well. They will be a new generation of good fighters, ready to defend our lands for when our men are out or drunk or both.”

“Well, she is not the almost bad,” Jaime says, tilting his head to the side.

“Not the almost bad? Ha!” the old woman snorts, letting out a dry laugh towards the end. Jaime can’t help but frown when the hag sits down next to him, swinging her short legs up and down a few times, moving more like a child than an elderly.

“May I know your name?” Jaime asks. “I rather know who sits next to me.”

“Oh, where are my manners? See? That is the charm of the old, we get to be impolite all we want without being corrected. The name is Maggy,” she says, wriggling her wrist roughly in his direction.

Jaime already reckoned that this has to be her, but it can’t harm to make sure.

“I am Jaime…,” he means to say, but the old hag cuts him off with the click of her tongue before he can even say his name, and if not for the old woman being quirky and old, he would love to curse her for not letting him say his name only just once.
She will surely say nothing but Kingslayer to me from now on. They all do. My name no longer bears any other meaning to... anyone, no matter how often I say it.

However, Jaime knows better than to let on just how much it bothers him.

He is not supposed to care.

We don’t concern ourselves with the opinion of the sheep. Right?

“Jaime Lannister of Casterly Rock. Son of Jarl Tywin, head of the Lannister family,” the old woman recites knowingly.

Jaime blinks. It’s always nice to hear one’s own name coming from another person.

“Most commonly known as the Kingslayer,” Maggy goes on.

However short-lived that joy may be.

“You are the seer of the town, I assume?” Jaime asks, trying his best to sound disinterested.

“So, Brienne has been talking about me after all. Good girl, she is,” the old woman chimes. “But yes, that is what I am. A blind seer no less!”

“Is there any certain reason why you bother talking to me, seer?” Jaime questions. “It’d seem to me that someone like you should have more urgent business than conversing with a prisoner.”

“I am an old hag, I don't need reason to do much of anything,” the woman tells him.

Jaime chuckles softly. “Is that so?”

“Absolutely,” Maggy answers. “That is the charm of growing old, one of the few there is. We get to be quirky. You’d have no idea what people let me do even though I have my wits far better together than the folks give me credit for.”

“You have to make use of the opportunity,” Jaime agrees, amused.

He can very well relate to that. Jaime has to use any opportunity arising, too, to slip away and get back home. It is part of human nature to use chances given. Even if the wench insists on the dishonor of the act, Jaime doesn’t care about honor so long it ensures that he gets back home, and doesn’t live in the constant danger of being killed thanks to one of the wench’s mood swings, or because the youths see fit of his being sacrificed to the Gods after all.

“Precisely,” the blind woman agrees, nodding her head slowly.

“So there is no reason why you bother with the Kingslayer?” Jaime jokes drily.

“What? The whole village is speaking of you, in case you didn’t hear the whispers that amount to a loud cry already. That would be the same as not bothering to take a look at a blue bear if it were to find its way to the village,” she snorts. “You always look at that which is new and of the village’s interest. That’s just natural.”

“It’s always a pleasure to hear that I am of everyone’s concern,” Jaime huffs.

He would rather fade from people’s consciousness, though, particularly of those who have nothing but scorn and mockery for him.
“They are just mad that we didn’t get to open you from naval to chin to sacrifice you to the Gods. You would have made a good sacrifice, I believe. You may be a bit too thin in frame, but your ego must delight the Gods, because there is just so much of it!” the old woman laughs throatily.

“How do you know that I am thin?” Jaime asks, his lips curling into a grimace.

Maggy rolls her shoulders. “You sound thin.”

Jaime chuckles. “Do I?”

“Hmmm.”

Jaime tilts his head to the side. Something is strange about that woman, and not just that the fact that she seems to know exactly what is going on before her eyes despite the fact that she cannot know, though then again, Jaime has grown weary of seers long time ago.

“How do you know that I am thin?” Jaime asks pensively.

“You may… though, no, you likely don’t,” Maggy replies, wrinkling her nose.

“Why only *just* likely?” Jaime asks with a frown.

Either you met someone, or you did not.

Either you are a good man, or you are not.

Either you have honor, or you don’t.

You can’t be mad and sane at the same time.

You can’t be good and bad at the same time.

At least in the public opinion. You are either this. Or that. And Jaime had it long enough that people put him into one of the two categories, never allowing him to transgress.

“Well, you could know me, by chance, but I doubt it,” Maggy says, licking her chapped, almost lilac lips.

Jaime reckons the woman helps herself to some shade of the evening, which earns her that wicked tint to her thin lips.

“How would I know you, then?” he asks.

*It’s not like I have much else to entertain myself with. So I might just as well talk to the one person willing to speak to me. The wench still feels too hurt to have conversation with me in all earnest. Thus, the hag will have to do.*

“Why, I have been to many different places over the years,” Maggy tells him. “I have flitted across the Seven Kingdoms, when they were still seven kingdoms, that is. To and fro, as though I was a raven bringing messages back and forth that no one ever received. And before that, it was the lands beyond the Narrow Sea which I explored. At some point, I had to come by the Rock. That seemed almost inevitable.”

“You, at the Rock? And here I thought they found you here, grown into a tree, even before they settled down in this place, old woman,” Jaime jokes, and the jest seems well-received by Maggy, who croons almost joyfully at that, her short legs bobbing up and down three times.
“Oh no, I don’t come from here. Mine are the lands of… I forgot. Someplace that is not this place. It’s been far too long to bother to remember, but the place was there before the seer came, that much is for sure,” Maggy tells him.

“So? How did you like it at the Rock?” Jaime asks.

“I hated it,” Maggy declares, which has Jaime let out a surprised laughter.

“Really? Some people say that there is no more beautiful place in the West than Casterly Rock,” Jaime argues. He didn’t always appreciate his home’s beauty, but Jaime learned this lesson over the years that he was forced out of his home, out of himself, as he swore service to a madman. And now he only longs for the massive rocks, painted golden and mulberry in the sun rising over the blue waters, coloring them teal.

“Oh, the city itself is fancy to look at, I assume at least. After all, I am blind, huh?” she chuckles. “It was the smell, though. It stinks of arrogance and Tywin Lannister’s shitting gold.”

“You do know that us Lannisters don’t actually shit gold, yes?” Jaime laughs. Though he has to give the woman that much – there is hardly a place in the Westeros that stinks more of arrogance than this city.

“I’d like to believe that your family is useful that way,” Maggy argues. She leans her head back slightly. “I mean, I’ve met some of your kin. That dull sister of yours.”

“You know, you shouldn’t insult a jarl’s daughter like that,” Jaime tells her in a slightly warning tone.

There was a time when he would have chased that woman away for the effrontery of a sister he once was far too close with, now in chains or not, but that was back when he was a foolish lad, a child in mind, and in the end, Jaime assumes it was for the best that the first tastes of horror and war washed the folly out of the both of them.

“She is like that, has always been,” Jaime says with a grimace. While Cersei may be known for her beauty, she was never known for her kind nature. Jaime tends to believe that his twin sister takes a strange sort of pride in not paying anyone any respect, seemingly confusing that with what Father used to hammer into their brains since they were young – that they stand above them all. To Cersei, that always equaled having to treat anyone the worst possible to feel even more elevated.

“Well, she is a wealthy jarl’s wife now, so perhaps she was right about it in some strange way after all.

“You foretold Cersei her future?” Jaime asks.
She’s never told him about that as far as Jaime can remember. And by that time, they were still firm in the belief that they were basically one person.

“Maybe I did, maybe I did not. She’s asked for it, that much I can say,” Maggy replies.

“What did you tell her?” Jaime questions. The old woman turns her head in his direction, raising her eyebrows in a way that clearly transmits the message “did you ask in all sincerity now, expecting an answer, you fool?”

“As though I would share that with you,” she huffs, clicking her tongue once. “A person’s future is his or her own alone. I wouldn’t go share your destiny with Brienne either, if she were to ask. Though I can say that one thing about your sister’s fortune: She takes things way too literally. She is really rather dull, I assume. And now wife to a dull jarl. A dull jarl’s dull wife! Ha! But at least she is pretty. That seems to be the one redeeming aspect in most people who can’t help but be unbearable otherwise.”

“You saw Cersei only once, at Casterly Rock,” Jaime argues, frowning. “How would you know her… that much closer?”

“The fortune I saw of her didn’t paint her any smarter,” is the only reply he gets.

“You should really pay her more respect,” Jaime tells her, though he really stopped taking personal offense long time ago. “As you said, she is wife to the Jarl of King’s Landing for some many years now.”

“I am old and quirky. I owe no one any respect, Kingslayer. If anyone were to ask, I’d claim to have lost my wits. Who would they be to tell me otherwise?” Maggy argues. “Though that doesn’t make it any less true. She is not half as smart as she believes herself to be. But then again, who is?”

“You may have a point there,” Jaime snorts.

She laughs at that. “Of course I do. I am a seer. We are all about making points no one understands until we get to tell them that we told them so.”

“Now, that’s an interesting perspective on foreseeing the future,” Jaime snorts, amused. “The seer at the Rock is much more… dramatic.”

And more insistent.

That man took himself and still takes himself by far too important in Jaime’s opinion. He never understood why his Father even kept the man around. Though of course, that seer had a reputation before he ever came to the Rock. That he could fathom clear pictures of the future. His visions were both adored and feared. Whereas, for Jaime, they just served as a source of annoyance and discomfort.

Jaime can still vividly recall that foolish get-together he was forced into as a young lad when he had his initiation ritual. Jaime hated every second of it. The smoke made him sick. The sparks and embers flying up into a pitch black night’s sky made him see fire behind closed eyelids, only ever bringing about within him dizziness. The stuff the seer made him drink made him feel hot and cold at the same time so that Jaime was drenched in cold sweat. The heat of the fire burned in his eyes. The soot made him cough. The seer’s singing and chanting was about as awful to listen to as it made Jaime lose any sense of direction as his head bobbed back and forth to the rhythm of the drums, to the point that his blood pulsated to that melody.

And all that for some blurry images flickering up behind Jaime’s eyelids as he sat there, sweating,
praying to Odin to stop this madness, as the seer went on to chant, told him again and again “Dream away, Jaime Tywinson! Dream away! See the future! Open your eyes to what lies ahead of you! Dream away! Dream on! Dream away! Dream on! Dream away! Away! Away!” And while Jaime did dream on and far away, as the seer demanded it, shaking him by the shoulders over and over, that was one of the first times Jaime came to believe that the Gods may be out there, but not for them.

Because many years have passed since, and all Jaime ever saw of that dream was what he saw as a lad, sweating and on the verge of passing out. He never saw it again in reality, the dream never exited the world far away to come close by. It was nothing but a dream, a fantasy that came from that wicked stuff tasting of rotten berries and raw bird’s eggs.

*The only thing that came about was fire.*

*Burn them all. Burn them all. Burn them all.*

 Needless to mention that it was this witless seer who suggested that foolish thing to his father that brought Jaime here in the first place, and for that alone, he’d want to open that man’s belly to see what is oh so magical about him.

“Seers tend to be dramatic,” Maggy huffs. “That’s not my style, though.”

“Might be for the better,” Jaime snorts. “What *is* your style then?”

“As though I was going to tell you that,” Maggy laughs, wriggling her legs again.

And it is at that moment that Jaime feels reminded of his brother. While Maggy may be taller than him, she has a very similar way of behaving. Tyrion, since he was a young boy would always wriggle his legs around like that.

*The Gods know how much I miss that little devil,* Jaime thinks to himself, chewing on his lower lip.  *And Gods know what harm may come his way when I am not around.*

And that is what makes him so furious for Brienne not understanding that. She has her father here, Jaime has his brother elsewhere. He has his family far away from him, she does not.

*Can’t she understand that I, too, just want to be home?*

He had to travel many miles, had to see many terrors, spend countless hours alone, drenched in sweat from the images of the past evading his mind, to see the value of a home, which Jaime does not want to leave again for long, if he can help it somehow. Casterly Rock is now his place to be, not the capitol. The King is gone, the King is dead, he has seen to that. Jaime went out to protect his home, even if all of it was no more than a charade, a game to play at his father’s will. However, that changes nothing about his devotion to stay home, stay with his people.

“Has the seer told you your future yet?” Maggy asks, pulling Jaime out of his mind, back to the reality of being tied to a pole by a beach, whereas the wench is completely ignorant of him as she goes on training the young girls in the arts of war.

“I thought you don’t make it your business what seers told other people about their futures,” Jaime snorts.

“No, no, you got me wrong. I don't tell people’s future to others. That doesn’t mean I don’t want to know what other seers believe to have seen in the flames or in… fish guts,” the old woman argues. “Though I may say that I find those largely ineffective. And they stink!”
“I rather do without the seer. If the future is predestined, and I were to know it all before it comes to me, it’d spoil the surprise, right?”

Maggy cackles at that, wriggling her legs again as she clicks her tongue almost gleefully. “Now, that is the kind of attitude I appreciate.”

“If everyone thought like that, you’d have no work,” Jaime points out to her, if amused.

“True again,” she agrees, tilting her head to the side. “I need the believing people, particularly the dumb ones. Ugh. What a misfortune. And I here I thought I could do away with them.”

“We don’t get around the dumb people, no,” Jaime chuckles softly.

_They are the backbone of society!_

“Well, maybe you are just trying to run from your own destiny,” Maggy then goes on to say, with far less sarcasm than he would have wanted her to.

“I tend to think that destiny could have killed me many times by now, but did not. If destiny intends on killing me, it will happen, but I fear it no longer,” Jaime tells her simply. It’s no secret he has to hide.

Jaime is a warrior. Warriors are prepared to die for their cause, to get a clean death in battle. And so the Gods will, and so the Gods are true, that will earn him a seat at Odin’s table. And if not, then at the very least, Jaime can tell himself that he fought bravely before he went into an abyss of nothingness.

“Nonsense, everyone fears death,” Maggy argues.

“I don’t,” Jaime insists.

He gave up the moment on he was willing to throw it away for half a million people. After that, one’s own life no longer seems as utterly important. For that, the life of one king was taken by far too important for far too long.

“Well, let me put it like this: You don’t _want_ to live without fear of death,” she argues. “Or rather, you should.”

He frowns. “Why so?”

The old woman licks her lips. “A man who is unafraid of death truly is a man who has nothing to lose, nothing to fight for. A man who knows no fear is nothing.”

“We warriors pride ourselves with being fearless,” Jaime argues.

“They all _claim_ it, but deep down they are not. And _that_ is good. _That_ is noble. _That_ is what makes them strong. A man who has no fear has nothing to lose, nothing to gain. A man who knows no fear cannot overcome it in order to grow, high into the sky, all the way to the tips of the branches of the world ash _Yggdrasil_. A man who knows no fear cannot battle it and turn out victor, surpass himself and win true glory. Only those who know the despair of fear will ever feel the joy of victory.”

“Wise words wasted on a Kingslayer,” Jaime huffs, if nervously so, because he cannot deny that there might be something to the old woman’s words.

“Oh, I have many wise words still left. Fret not that I’d run out of them,” Maggy snorts.
“Oh, I don’t fret, really,” Jaime chuckles.

Maggy tilts her head to the side as she seemingly watches Brienne again. “I dreamed of you before you came here, or rather, were dragged here, on a leash.”

Jaime furrows his eyebrows. “Did you?”

Maggy nods her head.

“What did I do in your dream?” Jaime asks.

“You made one foolish mistake after the other, stumbled and fell over and over,” Maggy snorts, to which Jaime laughs, “Hm, that may be surprisingly accurate. Or unsurprisingly, considering that I am the Kingslayer who got caught right in the act instead of running away.”

“I also got an image of what swept you to our shores, Kingslayer,” she goes on to say with a small smile creeping up her chapped lips.

“And what image was that?” Jaime asks, licking his lips.

Does she know…?

“Oh, where would be the fun in spoiling that, huh? Imagine if I am wrong. Then I am the fool you get to tell that you told her so. But if I keep it to myself, well, you will have to live with the fear that I will spill your dirty secret,” Maggy tells him, wriggling her legs again.

“It’s no dirty secret,” Jaime argues, shaking his head.

“Still one you wish to keep,” she points out to him, shrugging.

He rolls his shoulders, feeling tension in his limbs. “True.”

“I also have a hunch that you are full of trouble. You bring discordance to the village. That is never any good. They have that enough amongst themselves, because people are stupid like that,” Maggy sighs.

“That is hardly my problem, though, is it?” Jaime points out.

“No, not your problem, but still, you are part of the problem,” Maggy argues, before she looks at him almost expectantly. “So, will you be part of the solution?”

“Now you sound like Brienne,” the man snorts.

“Where do you think did she get that from?” Maggy huffs, suddenly standing up. “Well, in any case. I think you are full of trouble, Jaime Lannister, but I also think there is more to you than meets the eye.”

“Your blind eye?” he scoffs, though she only smirks at that. “It may be your fortune that I can see you with only my blind eyes. I tend to see past the exterior, to the worlds within.”

Jaime swallows. “And what do you see there, woman?”

She sucks in a deep breath before she goes on in a dark voice that has the fine hairs on Jaime’s neck stand up straight. “I see things that are taken to be one thing, but are another. I see wounds on you that just won’t heal. I see scars on you that do not show on the skin. I see despair and regret. I see cast behind you a shadow bigger than yourself. I see whispers. I see tears. I see unspoken desires and
wishes. I see fear.”

Jaime blinks at the woman, who seems very much changed now that she is so sincere in her words. He swallows thickly.

*How does she…?*

“But I also see a great light coming from the East to cut through the darkness you cloak yourself in, the cloak that once was white,” Maggy goes on. “I see in you a mirror. I see in you a reflection of another. I see in you what I saw in another person’s eyes.”

Jaime just keeps looking at the old woman as she continues, her voice almost shaking from the gravitas now. “I see what you are chasing, but I know you will not find it, for it is something else you should be chasing, the Gods command it. So long you search for the wrong thing, you will only ever find the wrong things. I see hope for you only once you start chasing what is yours to chase, yours to catch. And only then will you be granted to keep them and hold them, Kingslayer. Listen to my words.”

Jaime chews on his lips, then purses them into a thin line.

“I see a big future for you as well as a small one, continuing their little dance for dominance. It all depends on what you allow yourself to chase, whether you run circles on the earth, or run circles around the earth, chasing the moon. It all depends on how far you allow yourself to grow into the sky,” Maggy says dramatically, but then her expression changes completely, to what it was moments ago. “Oh, and one more thing?”

“Yes?” Jaime asks, letting out a light cough.

“If you dare hurt her,” Maggy says, turning her head in Brienne’s direction. “I will make it my personal obligation to destroy you. For that, I don’t even have to see into the future.”

“Destroy me? Don’t you think you overestimate yourself, old woman?” Jaime huffs, trying to hush the goosebumps away that she left with her big speech.

*Seers are quacksalvers, Tyrion always says it. Just like prophecies, they are like mules – the moment you trust them, they will kick you in the head!*

“You should make no mistake, Kingslayer. I may be old, I may be blind, but I have some skills to put to use, still,” she tells him.

“You want to curse me, treat me with the evil eye, is that it?” Jaime laughs.

“I will curse you most definitely,” Maggy answers. “And it will leave you begging for a quick death that I will not grant you. So, you better make sure you don’t cause her great pains, or else I will have to make you pay back for it, with interest.”

“How would you do that, old woman?” Jaime challenges her, but Maggy only ever rewards him with a lazy grin. “Didn’t you know? I have magical powers. Not just seeing things of future and past.”

“And what powers would that be?”

“Those you should fear, a lot,” Maggy replies with a wicked kind of grin.

Jaime lets out a long sigh as his eyes drift back to Brienne, helping up one of the girls who was too
confident in her steps and fell over as a result.

“It’s sweet of you to personally care about her that much,” he says in a hushed voice.

“Oh, it’s not even as much about the affection I bear her, despite the fact that I do. I also speak as a seer here. And in that position, it is mine to point out to you that you should mean her no harm. She stands higher than most.”

“Don’t tell me,” Jaime huffs. “Woman is freakish tall.”

“Brienne stands high because, she, too, is about to cast a great shadow,” Maggy argues, not meeting his gaze. “Depending on the choices she is bound to make.”

“I thought you don’t share people’s visions with others,” Jaime snorts, though it leaves him wondering anyway just what fortune the old hag has seen for that shieldmaiden

“And I don’t. Anyone in his or her right mind should be able to see it,” Maggy argues. “The tale I just told is not only a future one, it is a past one. She stood tall even before she was tall in frame. She stood at the top of the world, ready to conquer it. Until it was her world to be conquered. But as it is with the world… it only takes time until the tears have dried, have fed the Well of Urðr, to bring about new dips of dew to rain from the mighty ash tree’s leaves. All is meant to repeat itself, but repeat with a difference. And so she shall rise again.”

“Judging by the way the villagers treat her, they don’t seem to share the sentiment,” Jaime snorts.

Maggy rolls her bony wrist. “That is because they are dumb.”

Jaime lets out an amused sigh at that. “And here we go again, only ever reliant on the dumb people.”

“Sadly, there are more dumb than smart people in this world.”

“True.”

“In any case,” Maggy says, shaking out her limbs, sending some kernels of sand flying through the air. “You should better bear those words in mind, Kingslayer. While you don’t want to believe in your future being already written, the norns keep weaving destiny, like it now or not.”

“The norns shall weave as they wish, I will….” Jaime says, but then turns his head to find the spot behind him empty. The woman vanished. Jaime tears his head around from right to left to find her. She cannot have gotten that far, yet, the woman is gone, as though she was never there.

“Or did I just dream it?”

“Where did the old hag go?!” he mutters, whipping his head around. Jaime looks back at Brienne, who seems to finish up at last, the group of girls already dispersing behind her, going back to their usual businesses. She walks up to him, her face coated in a sheen of sweat, her flaxen hair standing up in all directions of the four winds, making her look even more like a warrior than a woman, even less so like a Jarl’s daughter. Brienne starts to untie him wordlessly.

“That was quite entertaining to watch,” Jaime tells her, wriggling his arms and legs to finally gain some freedom to move his limbs accordingly.

“Was it?” she asks, though it's not really a question.

And here we go again…
“I met that Maggy of yours,” he says, hoping that this will somehow spark up some reaction in the wench. She seemed fond enough of that wicked creature fading in and out of the world at will, or so it seems.

“Oh, I didn’t even see her here,” Brienne replies, wrinkling her nose.

“The woman vanished out of plain sight!” Jaime can’t help but break out saying.

“She does that sometimes, yeah,” the wench says, rolling her broad shoulders, as though it was the most common thing on earth to just vanish.

“But how?” he demands to know.

“I have no clue. She just does it,” Brienne replies, curling her lips into a frown.

“And you never question that?”

Brienne rolls her shoulders yet again. “Not really.”

Jaime grimaces. How is it that no one questions that witch and her abilities?!

“Maggy has her own ways. To ask her about all of her tricks and quirks would take a lifetime to learn about,” Brienne goes on to say as the ropes finally come loose.

“You move better with shield than you do with buckets, I will grant you that,” Jaime says, changing the topic abruptly, to which Brienne says nothing, though that seems hardly surprising. Jaime clicks his tongue.

Maybe I have to stop to talk about the matter if I want her to forget about it, though then again, that woman seemingly doesn’t forget a single slight.

Once Brienne untied him completely, she pulls him back up, and starts to walk him away from the beach.

“Wouldn’t you like to take a quick bath in the water?” Jaime teases. “I would even hold your clothes if you let me get a good look at you before you dive in?”

Brienne ignores him as the gives the leash a tug to make him follow.

“Or we could both leave our clothes and take a bath together! How does that sound? I could scrub your back with…,” Jaime means to say, but Brienne gives the leash connected to the collar around his neck such a sharp tug that he has the air knocked out of him.

“If you want me dead, you could at least give me a clean death,” Jaime coughs, to which Brienne retorts, “If you want to stay alive, you should watch your tongue.”

“Oh, I can watch it just fine. How about I watch it as I suckle on your cunt? I bet the training got you plenty wet, as much as you seem to enjoy yourself wearing men’s clothes, swinging around swords…,” Jaime says, fully expecting the next tug of the leash that nonetheless knocks the air out of him.

Brienne drags him away from the beach wordlessly, and Jaime finds himself almost dreading to have to leave this place, because he is now back to the routine of being dragged around. Then Maggy with her strange, cutting comments seemed a more bearable alternative.

And back through the village we go.
“I thought we are going back to the house,” Jaime comments once Brienne guides him back towards the marketplace.

“I have to get some things from the market, still,” is the only explanation he receives.

And so, to the marketplace we go!

Once they get there, Brienne maneuvers with precision to the stands she needs, paying good coin for fish and barley flour, seagull eggs, which Jaime must say he didn’t ever eat until now, alongside some onions and beetroots.

While at it, Jaime takes a good look around the people busy staring back at them, whereas Brienne tries her best to avert her gaze and focus on the task, which has Jaime wondering if the wench isn’t a bit more like him after all, just not letting it show how much it sizzles underneath her freckled skin to hear those whispers, no matter where you go or turn.

The two stop by a small stand that offers some odd-looking herbs, which Jaime has never consciously laid eyes on either. Though the young man reckons he saw them while wading through the woods, Jaime wouldn’t know what they are good or bad for. His rule of thumb was always to stay away from herbs and rather focus on meat. That is not nearly as often poisonous as most plants tend to be.

“Good day,” Brienne greets the old woman, who raises an eyebrow at them.

“Good day.”

“I hope all is well,” Brienne goes on politely, way too politely to Jaime’s liking because that would be up to the woman looking on so cloudily.

“I can’t complain,” the older woman replies, making her disinterest no secret, though really, she shouldn’t. “What can I do for you?”

“Do you come to have an herb that bleeds out green color a lot? I want to make some green threads and would like them to have a rich sort of green,” Brienne explains.

“Well, they all bleed green,” is the reply she receives. Jaime sucks the inside of his cheek into his mouth.

“I am aware, good woman,” Brienne says, seemingly sticking to diplomacy, when really, she shouldn’t. “I was just wondering if there is one that bleeds greener than others. I normally use the herbs that I grow myself, but they are rather pale in the end.”

“Maybe you just do it wrong,” the woman suggests, pulling on a thread Jaime knows as a matter of fact is not there.

“I don’t think so, good woman,” Brienne tells her, still trying to stay polite, her lips curling into an uncertain grimace, which would have been to Jaime’s delight any other day, because seeing the wench squirm is one of the few pleasures he has for himself. But this here? Jaime finds himself appreciating that not at all. He knows very well what the old bitch means to actually say, as does Brienne, though she does better at hiding it. The woman doesn’t take Brienne seriously to want to do the women’s task of weaving, walking around clad as a warrior, still.

Brienne lets out a long sigh, glancing at the herbs again. “If you can’t give any recommendations, I will just take a bit of each, to see what works.”
“Or,” Jaime jumps in. “Good woman, you could admit to yourself that you know shit about the herbs you sell, which would be quite scandalous, wouldn’t you agree? Who’d know whom you poison with them already!”

“No one asked you, you backstabber of a King!” the older woman curses, obviously offended, which is, in turn, something Jaime very much appreciates.

“It was no answer either,” Jaime retorts. “And it’s Kingslayer for you.”

Brienne gives him a stern look as Jaime twists around to lean against the wooden frame of the stand.

“I see it like this, good woman: If you knew your herbs well, you should have no trouble sharing with your Jarl’s daughter the secret of how she gets the greenest dye. While, by contrast, if you didn’t know them well at all, you shouldn’t be selling them in the first place and instead just look on gloomily as you do so all day long, for all I can see.”

Jaime can observe from the corner of his eye that Brienne is about as surprised by his comment as the old woman is, and if he is not mistaken, there is the faintest of blushes that comes with the scowl that inevitably follows suit.

Now, if that isn’t something to appreciate indeed!

That poor woman likely doesn’t get chivalric acts committed in her name very often, or so Jaime reckons. Small wonder that Brienne seems to be caught perfectly off-guard when someone demands the basic respect for her in her name.

“Or of course, we could see about some other old woman who’d have likely better herbs as well as manners when it comes to the Jarl’s only daughter,” Jaime goes on, each word cutting through the air like a sharp knife. “Leaves me wondering what the Jarl would think of it if he were to know how the good herb lady treats his own blood.”

The old woman licks her thin lips. “The leaves of the lily of the valley are good. It gives a very rich green to the wool.”

“Then she will take…,” Jaime says, before looking over at Brienne. “How much do you need?”

“To fill a small bucket with dye,” she replies rather uncertainly, gesturing with her hands. “About this size.”

“I suppose the good woman will know how much you need, then,” Jaime says, turning back to the old hag. “Won’t you?”

The old woman grumbles as she prepares a bundle for Brienne, who gives her good coin for it in turn.

“Thank you. Have a good day,” Brienne says before starting to walk again. Jaime trots after her, with more swing in his step now.

This felt curiously satisfactory, he notes to himself.

“You didn’t have to do that,” the wench then says, pulling Jaime out of his thoughts, back to Brienne.

“I know.”
“Then why did you?” Brienne asks, chewing on her bottom lip.

“Disrespect pisses me off even more than your scowling at me does. Less than you smacking me, but definitely more than your scowling. Which sure as Hel means something,” Jaime tells her.

Brienne rolls her broad shoulders as they continue making their way back to the house. “I don’t care for that so long they follow the orders.”

“You only invite them not to do it once they travel past your lips,” Jaime argues.

*Small wonder that they don’t listen to her, if she allows an herb lady to be that cheeky to her.*

“You seem to forget that I am no son to Jarl Selwyn but his one living daughter. They are not to take my orders, unless my father is not around, which he is,” Brienne replies, not looking at him.

Jaime speeds up a bit to now walk beside her, and for once, the wench permits it. “Well, I will tell you that one thing: My sister shouldn’t have any say in much of anything, not for matters of her sex, but really because she is lousy at making calls. Still, the men listen to her because she assumes her position by her fat husband’s side. And in that regard, she is ahead of you, even. Which should give you pause.”

“I am no wife to a powerful jarl,” Brienne argues, barely moving her lips apart as she speaks.

“But a jarl’s daughter no less, which means, *at the very least*, that they owe it to you to keep their comments and glances to themselves until they are safely back home where they don’t have to fear for the Jarl’s or the Jarl’s daughter’s wrath to come upon them.”

“If you say so…” she replies in a meek voice very much unfit a woman as tall and strong as that shieldmaiden who’s beaten any of the girls into the ground, at once.

“You know, maybe they’d take you more seriously as a housewife if you were to walk around here in dress more often,” Jaime notes.

“I rarely do, actually,” Brienne answers, lost in thought, to which he frowns. “Why so? *That seems to be what earns you most of the glances.*”

*And it’s not like she doesn’t wear a dress around home.*

“It’s more practical like that,” Brienne explains, not meeting his gaze. “Especially since I normally come down to train either the youths or the girls.”

“And that’s the only reason?” Jaime asks.

“No, it’s… I wouldn’t know what they’d laugh at more— a mannish woman in dress, or a mannish woman in men’s clothes,” Brienne sighs. “At some point I tend to believe that they get used to the latter easier in the end. Because mannish looks and men’s clothes seem to be easier to reconcile than two things so very different, like a mannish exterior in a woman’s dress. At least that is so in my experience.”

Jaime frowns at the bitterness in her voice right there, but chooses not to call her upon the matter.

*Or else that witch from the beach will creep out from under a rock and strangle me!*

“How is there any chance that you will weave something for me?” Jaime asks after a while of silently trotting next to each other.
Brienne grimaces at him. “Why would I weave you something?”

“Because those clothes don’t fit me!” Jaime complains. “You said it yourself! And it’s just not my color. I’d much prefer something in red, Lannister red, to be exact.”

“I won’t make you new clothes,” she huffs.

“Why not? I thought you are halfway good at this,” Jaime teases.

“That doesn’t mean I will waste valuable wool on you,” Brienne argues. “Or even more valuable dye.”

“You have enough money to spare a bit for a poor Kingslayer seeking some red,” he insists, to which Brienne snorts, “And you would want to wear the ugly clothes I make?”

“They look better than most of what I saw around here,” Jaime mutters.

There is another moment of silence.

“I am not making you new clothes,” she concludes.

He moans. “Oh please.”

“No.”

“It doesn’t have to be a very rich red, but some kind of red. At least a tunic or so, come now, wench, don’t be so cruel,” Jaime pleads.

“No!”

“I am asking really nicely!” he insists.

“I can dye it with blood, your blood,” Brienne suggests, narrowing her big blue eyes at him. “How does that sound?”

“Blood turns brown once it dries,” Jaime groans, rolling his eyes. “And I won’t suffer through bleeding for the dye if it isn’t resulting in good Lannister red.”

“How about this?” Brienne then says. “If you behave yourself, let’s say, for a week, then you will get something to wear in Lannister red.”

Jaime tilts his head to the side, facing more towards her. “But that would mean I would have to behave myself for a week.”

“Precisely,” Brienne points out to him.

“And if I don't behave myself after the week is over?” Jaime asks.

“Then I take it from you again,” Brienne replies nonchalantly.

“You can’t just take back a gift. That is not how gifts work,” Jaime pouts.

“It’s a gift you only get for good behavior.”

“Then it is no gift,” Jaime grumbles.

They trot the hill up until the house is finally in sight, and Jaime finds his feet lighter now. Perhaps
the fresh air by the beach did well to ease out some of the kinks in his back, against the odds of constantly being tied up like a bloody dog.

“That is more than a prisoner would normally ever even get, in case you are unaware,” Brienne points out to him.

Jaime narrows his eyes at her. “You just want to manipulate me into not escaping, which we both know is a thing of impossibility.”

“How do you always say? It’s worth the try,” Brienne says as they come to the house, and almost instantly, that bloody wolf with brown fur runs up to them.

And that despite the fact that the wench never even bothered to call for him, let alone whistle!

Brienne pats the animal’s fur once, which seems to calm the vicious beast enough not to lunge at Jaime at once, though he makes sure to trot after them now. Once inside the house, Sun on their heels, the same procedure from earlier the day repeats itself, much to Jaime’s disappointment as he finds himself being led into Brienne’s room, and forced to sit on the ground as though he was one of her wolves.

Speaking of, said bloody wolf simply resumes his position right next to Jaime, or rather, his face, seemingly wanting to lick Jaime’s really badly as he keeps licking his chaps to leave them even blacker and more glistening.

While everything is strange here, Jaime finds himself caught up in way too many routines already.

“Do I take it that you like it to undress with me in the chamber? Does that give you a thrill that keeps you warm at night as you think about me?” he taunts her.

“You can count yourself lucky that I can’t slap you right now,” Brienne grumbles. From the sounds of it, she is busy with her breeches. “The only reason that I have you here is that you proved that you will slip away first chance you get. So unless you want to be tied to the pole whenever I change, for which we can well arrange, no bother, you should not complain about this arrangement here.”

“Oh, I don’t complain so much about the arrangement itself, but more about the arrangement of me having to face the wall! You could strip for me. Oh, or I strip you, tear off your clothes… OW!” he howls, when he gets slapped in the neck again. “I thought you couldn’t hit me?”

“If it matters, I will make room for it, Kingslayer.”

“So, do I take it that you slapped me, standing behind me naked? How daring of you, wench!” Jaime teases. “And all that without pressing yourself against me! Or at least let me get a touch and a feel of that!”

He anticipates the next slap, but Jaime finds it worth it. He is sure that she is blushing all over, and isn’t that oh so sweet? Jaime can hear Brienne waddle back over to where she has her clothes, continuing with her routine which he keeps intervening, twisting, turning. He casually uses the opportunity to turn his head far enough to steal a glance at her exposed calves as she pulls her dress over her head.

If things continue at this rate, it won’t take me long until I’ve seen all of hers without her ever taking notice of it! One body part at a time!

“Eyes to the front,” Brienne orders.
“I am not looking.”

“Yes, you are.”

“You don’t even see a thing,” Jaime huffs. “You already sound like that quirky old hag.”

“Maggy can see better than most, I learned,” Brienne replies, pulling her head through the collar, her hair a mess of unruly curls, and yes, a blush on her cheeks, no doubt, though Jaime tears his head back before she can catch him catching her.

“And you?” he asks.

Jaime can hear her walk up behind him. “I can hear the change of your voice when you turn your head towards me, so I know that you are looking.”

And the smack follows inevitably.

“I didn’t even see much of anything!” Jaime pouts. “Not that there is much to look at anyway!”

And another smack – though Jaime knows he deserved that one.

“That means I won’t get anything in Lannister red, soon, right?” he sighs.

“I may let that slide,” Brienne exhales. “Wickedness seems to be part of your nature anyway.”

“What would I have to do for it?” Jaime asks, swinging back and forth on his rear. “Oh, I have an idea! Send that slobbery beast out and then I shall treat you with my tongue instead of having your mutt treat me with his. Though I would obviously be far gentler, and quite obviously, too, I would not only lick your face, but trail further down until I get some honey.”

“You are not even trying,” Brienne snorts.

“If you count it as bad behavior to make some jests, there is no way for me to ever win only just a shred of red,” Jaime argues.

“True again,” she exhales.

Jaime chuckles to himself. At least Brienne isn’t treating him with as much silence anymore. While he is stuck in this stupid village with its disrespectful people, witches fading in and out of the world, and tall wenches maltreating him; and while Jaime is still eagerly searching for a way to escape, he may just as well get to know her. It’s not like there is much else to do.

Needless to mention that the better he understands the enemy, the easier and swifter the escape will be. And Brienne should better help for his swiftness, or else she will have to suffer a quick death. And while Jaime doesn’t feel the need to kill her, he is going to if that gets him his freedom, easy as that. Those are the rules of war.

And in war, the one plain rule always goes: Every man for himself.

“So? Will you send the mutt away? I would kiss you down there first until you’d turn liquid in my grasp,” Jaime says with a grin. “And who knows, maybe that’s all it takes for you to finally agree to a good fucking in exchange of my freedom.”

Brienne walks past him, scratching the direwolf behind the ears. “Sun, give him a kiss.”

“No!” Jaime shrieks, but by that time, the damned beast yanked him to the ground and licks across
his face without abandon.

“Get him off of me!” he howls.

And that mutt better not get in his way once he makes his escape, or else Jaime will feast on direwolf by the time he is out of that village.

Brienne lets the beast lick across Jaime’s face for a few more seconds before whistling once, which has the beast retreat at once.

“Two times in one day!” he moans, blinking at Brienne. “Well, at least you’ll have to wash it off of me now. Serves you right.”

The wench, unimpressed, gives the leash a tug to gesture at him to stand back up, which Jaime begrudgingly does.

“Sit,” she orders.

“Not that again,” he grunts, only for Brienne to push him roughly onto the stool.

“You know that was entirely on you,” the wench points out to him, already motioning over to the basin to wet a cloth. Jaime looks over his shoulder, for a moment finding himself strangely fascinated by how different Brienne seems in dress.

For that the villagers believe her to be a thing of travesty if Brienne is to wind up in dress, she moves very much like any other woman Jaime has seen run around in skirts. And in fact, Brienne is surprisingly confident in a dress, when you should think that she should feel only ever comfortable in warrior clothing.

Truth be told, Jaime actually thought that Brienne wore the dress as a disguise, when in fact it seems to be quite the other way around. At home, Brienne wears a dress because she feels comfortable wearing it around her father, and seemingly doesn’t care about him seeing her in a dress. Yet, around the village, she knows that this will earn her even more glances than the men’s clothes would.

Jaime watches Brienne while the thoughts about her in dress and warrior attire keep dancing over his nose as she comes back to bend down before him, running the moist cloth over his face.

And it is during that moment that Jaime really cannot spot a single difference between that shieldmaiden and any other maid, any other housewife, despite her ungainly looks. As though it was a side of hers Brienne keeps away from the public, so that no harm can be done to it. After all, dresses rarely withhold sword blows as much as boiled leather does.

“There the Kingslayer is again,” she says in a soft voice, and if Jaime didn’t know any better, he’d tend to believe there is a hint of a smile creeping up her lips as she straightens back up to return to the basin to wash out the cloth.

It is during those small moments that he doesn’t feel like a prisoner.

“What are we doing for the rest of the day?” Jaime asks.

“Well, I am preparing dinner, and getting the dye done for tomorrow,” Brienne replies.

“Red dye, too?” he asks with a grin.

“We will have to see,” Brienne tells him, seeing about the fire, yet again, looking like any housewife
Jaime saw tending to the hearth and the children.

And it only occurs to him right at this instance that this side of hers lay out in the open to him for a couple of days by now, but Jaime took no notice of it, which may well be owed to her impossible behavior to her prisoner. However, it still has him wondering at himself that he never caught that until now. Despite the fact that Jaime prides himself with reading people almost as good as his little brother does it, who mastered these arts to perfection, he seemingly missed that.

This side of hers? Jaime didn’t read it until just now, which has him wondering how it is possible that the people all around Brienne, who know her, who saw Brienne grow from a young – still likely very tall for her age – girl into a woman, never seem to have caught that. Because it’s not like Brienne is hiding behind the shed if one of the lads were to see her in dress. She stood as proudly as ever before him and the others, when he was dragged to the mud before that little house.

It’s a truth not even hiding in plain sight. It just lays there, and no one picks it up.

Though that may be just it.

For all Jaime can gather, most people simply cannot cope with the simple but plain truth that Brienne feels comfortable in both, and that the wench tries to keep one side from them that doesn’t emit strength as much as does a warrior’s leather, a warrior’s shield, battle axe, or sword.

It doesn’t occur to many that you can be both at the same time.

For, it appears, you can be both after all.

That you can want two things at a time.

Just like they can’t seem to fathom that an act of dishonor may still bear honor.

So perhaps Brienne has the rights of it – a shieldmaiden needs her shield, whatever shape it may have.

Her nom I mmmr. nom miihnt brr. Her nom I mmmr. miihnt brr de brr mamb.
Her nom I mmmr. miihnt brr. Nett imhmm km. Ytt brr mamb km. Frrer.
Chapter Summary

Jaime finds himself stuck in the house with Selwyn, which brings about some revelations, not just about the jarl and his stubborn daughter, but also, if not foremost, about himself.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, thanks for sticking around.

I apologize in advance for long update time and for late replies that I will take care of shortly, but since I am currently wrapping up my MA, things have been kind of swamped with work rather than the acts of fanfic writing.

I hope you are going to like that chapter.

I yet again take some sparse vocab from what I hope are good internet sources to give a bit of a more Viking-vibe, though I will keep it at a minimum, I promise. I just like the idea of Jaime cursing in different languages, LOL. Plus, on the issue of the food I introduce in this chapter, that is the name I found specifically in my sources, which is why I stick to that term to describe that specific kind. I hope that it will bear some significance for the story as it progresses.

Anyway, I hope you are going to enjoy.

Much love! ♥♥♥

There once was a time when the mischievous giant Loki cut off the golden locks of the Lady Sif, wife to the mighty God of Thunder Thor, as she laid asleep in her bed one night, only for her to wake up with her beautiful head shorn and her pride cut deeper than any blade could ever reach.

Enraged, Thor demanded of the trickster that Sif’s hair be replaced, or else he would break every bone in Loki’s body as means of punishment.

Fearing for his body to be smashed by the raging husband back in Asgard, the God of Mischief set out to travel to Niðavellir, the realm of the dwarves. He sought out the two sons of Ivaldi to save himself from Thor’s fury.

The dwarves readily agreed to make hair from gold as fine as Sif’s fair locks once were, and used magic to make it grow on her head. Once the task was complete, the dwarves, meaning to win the
Gods’ favor, made even more gifts for the Æsir. For Freyr, they made the ship Skíðblaðnir, which was always wafted by favorable winds, just like it could sail on air as well as water. But that was not enough, no! The ship could hold all the gods and their mounts, but could be folded up to fit into one’s purse if need be, too. For the Allfather Odin, they made the spear Gungnir, which never failed hitting its target.

Loki was more than pleased with the gifts he received and declared the sons of Ivaldi the cleverest smiths in all of the Nine Realms. When the two dwarf brothers Brokk and Eitri heard of the trickster’s declaration, Brokk wagered Loki that his brother Eitri and he could make three items surpassing the glory of the ones which the God of Mischief already held.

Loki, being sure of his victory, took the wager, of course. After all, he was a trickster, and tricksters bear a certain affinity for the risk of the game. The price was that whoever lost would lose his head.

And so, the two brothers set out to the task. Brokk worked the bellows without relent or rest, while his brother worked the forge. Eitri reminded his brother that the bellows must never seize to pump, or else they would be bound to lose the bet against the God of Mischief. Brokk agreed and vowed to do as he was told.

The trickster, not blind or deaf to that circumstance, made his own plans of ensuring his victory. And so, while Brokk pumped the bellows day in, day out, Loki changed himself into a fly to torment the dwarf to force him to stop to get rid of the insect bothering him so.

After all, the trickster wanted to be sure to keep his head.

However, Brokk managed to withhold Loki’s torments while Eitri forged Gullin-börsti, the enormously fast golden boar meant for Freyr, and the gold arm ring Draupnir for the Allfather Odin, which dropped eight similar rings every ninth night.

Thus, the God of Mischief had to fear that he was about to lose the wager after all, which made it ever the more inevitable that Loki found a way to turn the fate in his favor and escape the destiny he spun with his trickery. And so, back into a fly he transformed himself, and stung the dwarf working the bellows just above the eye, causing a torrent of blood to stream down Brokk’s face. Blinded, the dwarf was bound to stop pumping the bellows for no more than the blink of an eye to wipe the blood away.

But the damage was already done.

The mighty hammer Mjölnir, meant as a gift for the God of Thunder, while still possessing its magic, was short in the handle.

Such a shame!

Despite the mishap, Brokk was still certain that he and his brother could succeed to win the wager with the gifts they had forged for the Gods. Together, the dwarves and the trickster thus travelled back to Asgard and presented the treasures to the Æsir, so they would be judge of which gifts were of the finest art.

After heavy debate, the Gods finally agreed that Brokk and Eitri had won the wager, despite the hammer coming with a short handle.

Loki, fearing to now lose his head, fled. He ran, ran for dear life itself, but he was overtaken by Thor and returned to Brokk to repay the debt he owed to them.

Such a shame!
As the dwarf approached the trickster to chop off his wicked head, Loki, at the very last moment, pointed out that while Brokk had rightly won his head, he had no rights to the trickster’s neck. And the Æsir were bound to agree to Loki’s objection, thus ruling that it was not the dwarf’s right to take the God of Mischief’s neck.

Brokk, denied full vengeance, decided that since Loki’s head was his, he could stop the trickster’s glib talk from slipping from his sharp tongue nevertheless. And so, using Eitri’s awl, the dwarf set to the task to sew Loki’s lips shut with a leather thong. And the trickster had to endure the punishment. His cries and shouts of agony were silenced by the leather binding his lips shut. While his life was spared, Loki still found himself in great pain and shame as his speech, his greatest power, was taken away from him.

After a time of silence, which must have felt like an eternity for the trickster, Loki succeeded in removing the thong all by himself, for none of the Æsir were willing to help him. After all, it was the Gods’ justice, and it was not in their nature to help the one creature who caused so much mischief and disdain amongst their own ranks escape the punishment he brought upon himself.

Thus, all on his own, all alone, the God of Mischief freed himself, and made plans for his sweet revenge soon to come upon them all for letting that happen, for abandoning him over no more than what he perceived was a little trick, a few strands of golden hair.

Because eternity seems to rest on those very pillars.

Thievery.

Taking a risk.

Life as a constant wager, a constant struggle to win a debt.

Debts to be paid.

Debts remaining unpaid.

Short-lived feelings of justice that are no true justice.

But at the very core of every tale of eternity stands the power that feeds into each new cycle, into each new beginning:

Sweet, sweet, bitter, bitter revenge.

Which begs all but one question: How do you stop that cycle without losing your head?

Jaime moves back and forth on his chair, flexing his fingers as they rest on the table, needing to move them to feel the blood still flowing within. And all that thanks to the wicked chains making his arms go to sleep way too often these days, leaving him with a constant tingling overshadowed only by the growing pain of his limbs, nourished by the growing shame Jaime feels for being a prisoner, wrapped in chains, treated like an animal at best.

Which just shows how wrong all of this is.

This is not how he should be treated.
This is not how he should live.

He is Jaime Lannister. Son of Tywin. Future Jarl of Casterly Rock, so the Gods will. And yet, he finds himself punished with shame for what was truly no thievery, because nothing was taken and nothing was gained. If only Jaime could make them understand it.

*If only I could say…*

Jaime is well accustomed to swallowing the pain that leaves no scars on the skin, but now he earns himself scars that will show. And they don’t come from battle, but only ever tell the shameful tale of how the lion was put on a leash, was put in a cage, and didn’t manage to break out just yet.

*And if this carries on, my hands will fall off.* Jaime thinks to himself as he readjusts his position yet again as jolts of pain run from his wrists all the way up to his hairline. His eyes drift over to the tall man sitting across him by the wooden table, reminding Jaime that he is apparently not the only one in the room, because he tends to forget sometimes, as often as he feels like the only person in the whole realm.

*There are no men like me, only me, after all.*

Though Jaime has to give Jarl Selwyn *that* much, he is a man who carefully selects his words and doesn’t get lost in boasting the way a lot of jarls do once they are granted the honor, way too often forgetting about the duty this position apparently comes with, too. Brienne’s father is quite another kind of man, and if it weren’t for these circumstances Jaime shamefully finds himself in right at this moment, he’d likely have a lot more appreciation to spare for this man.

Jaime reckons that he should consider it a fortune that he is stuck with the jarl who only wants him dead, whereas his daughter wants him to die slowly but surely, and likely as painfully as is possible, like the good old Loki had to suffer through having his lips sealed with a leather thong.

Just yesterday the wench smacked Jaime across the face for that one *tiny* incident of grabbing her rear and giving it a not *too* gentle squeeze when Brienne busied herself redoing the stupid knots on his stupid leash that he saw stars before his eyes.

*I can’t help it if she leaves her guard down like that, turning her back on me!* Jaime thinks to himself, remembering and still feeling the bruise on his jaw. *She makes it impossible not to use the opportunities she provides.*

The blond man was fairly certain that the wench was about to murder him right at that moment, if not for his name preventing her from it. He is not yet sure how far he can stretch his luck, or rather her patience, before anger will get the better of the jarl’s daughter, though. Jaime keeps trying without relent, because it is during those moments that he has best chances of slipping away. Yet, that bears on great risk of being crushed by that warrior woman wanting his head impaled on a stick.

So, having the wench far away may be the better option of the two, until Jaime figured out a less risky solution. Nevertheless, that changes nothing about the fact that this is wrong, *very* wrong, and that Jaime is perfectly out of place in this very place. He is a piece that does not belong, but those two stubborn people occupying this space, calling it their own, seemingly cannot recognize that this is why Jaime is so eager to get out of here, rather sooner than later, no matter the costs, no matter the price.

Because no one wants to live a life as a prisoner.

Because no one wants to fear to have his bones crushed.
Or one’s lips sewn shut, now with a leather thong the way it was done to the trickster Loki, or simply by forbidding Jaime to speak, not granting him a chance to explain himself, explain his purpose.

Jaime has no interest in staying a prisoner any more than he has to get beaten around by that beast of a woman. If he were a guest, then perhaps he could bring himself not to consider murdering either one of the two to break free, but he is no guest. Jaime is something they want to get rid of as much as he wants to disappear.

*Apparently, the only thing standing in the way is that they don’t let me go!*

However, no matter the shameful existence he suffers through right at this this, Jaime starts to pride himself with the wench being forced to make adaptations to the house, her precious home, her precious space that she doesn’t want him to be a part of. Only just for him. Because of him.

In a strange way, Jaime starts to leave traces in this house, even though the woman tries her best to remove him wherever she can, as though Brienne was constantly trying to wipe away any footprint he leaves on the wooden ground. Thus, it only serves her right that her oh so perfect, shielded home is getting evaded the same way Jaime finds his life evaded by her and her father.

At first, Jaime didn’t know what the wench was up to when she grabbed hammer and iron rings that clanked in her hand as she carried them inside, but soon enough he knew that Brienne was making arrangements around the house, for him, *finding solutions, as she calls it.*

Now, there are hooks attached to all sorts of places around the house, which limit his movement even more than the chains do by their very nature of being chains. While the woman still claims that it is only a matter of precaution, Jaime tends to think that she means to make this as much of a hellish experience as possible, if only just to get back at him for what happened by the well.

After all, revenge runs deep in their people’s blood. Not with Jaime, but any other person he’s made the acquaintance of throughout his life has this poisonous concoction running in his or her veins, ready to spill out into the world to start a war, big or small. And he is fairly convinced that the wench won’t be any different.

*They are all like that. Every single one. No one wants peace so long there is still the chance of gaining something from raids and plunder.*

Yet, no matter how he twists or turns it inside his head, those hooks on the walls now leave Jaime in the rather curious position of sitting by that bloody table that grew to be the center of his life, across from the jarl whose daughter wants him dead, ensuring that the prisoner doesn’t slip away. Though really, even if Jaime tried, he knows he couldn’t – *as of now at least.*

While he prides himself being able to slip out of almost any situation, Jaime is no Breaker of Chains. Like the God of Mischief, he will have to *talk* his way out of the constraints, and Jaime reckons that his taunts will fall flat on the jarl in a way that they don’t do on his daughter, which makes her perhaps the easier target of the two.

Attack her pride, attack her prudishness, tease her without relent, without letting shame or hesitance wash over you as you keep attacking, as you keep pushing, and you will have her fire back to have her wrists slip from the leash to throw a punch. The wench is easy enough in that regard, Jaime is most certain of that. It’s only a matter of time, only a matter of who loses his patience first.

*And having been a man of the Kingsguard, I learned that one thing after all, and that is patience indeed, waiting until the last second… and then strike, through the back if I must.*
Speaking of the wench, Brienne is absent from the kitchen, is absent from the house, leaving Jaime’s lips sealed for a longer while now. Because apparently, her father rarely speaks, just occasionally lets his glance swipe over Jaime before going back to the task of cutting out chunks out of a small piece of pine wood.

The wench is out, meanwhile, getting water without Jaime, doing this without him, doing that without him, dares to erase him from her precious routines. Jaime, meanwhile, remains tied to the house, stuck in nothingness, and in the strange sort of limbo of dreading her to come back only to have something to do, some place to occupy. Even if it’s only just that of a prisoner. Even if it’s only that of someone who gets scowled at. While Jaime assumes that to be better than being tied to a pole, it’s still too much of a constraint for him.


Needless to mention that my hands and head will come off from chafing if this carries on for much longer, and now if that isn’t a reason to wish to escape! Jaime thinks to himself, rotating his head where he can feel tender flesh rubbing against the metal of the chains wrapped around his neck.

Maybe he shouldn’t have made that attempt by the well, thinking about it, then perhaps the wench would have been trusty enough to relieve him at least of the neck chain by now. The cuffs around his wrists are a pain in the arse, too, but those he can live with.

And those I can get out of without having to break them.

“… So, Jarl Selwyn,” Jaime sighs, moving back and forth on his chair. “Are you already looking forward to the annual get-together of the Jarls?”

He is bored and starved for interaction the wench won’t provide, the grim-looking thing she is. Maybe the Jarl will continue to prove to be more reasonable than his mulishly stubborn daughter after all. Who knows?

It can’t harm to try.

Selwyn looks at him for a long moment, his knife resting on the piece of wood in his big hands, before he goes on to reply, “I can’t say I am looking forward to it. There is always quarrel and dissonance, but the althings are important for our people.”

“Certainly,” Jaime agrees.

“Why is it that you never attended, for all I know?” Selwyn asks. The younger man rewards him with a small smile, so the jarl goes on to add, “As Jarl Tywin’s oldest son and heir.”

“My Father dragged me along when I was still a boy. Back then, I had no say. Then, as you may remember, I was not at the Rock, because I served that fool of a king who trusted me enough to turn his back on me so that I could shove a sword through his back. Well, upon return to the Rock… I somehow lost interest in all of this quarrel and folly, as though there was a way to make the jarls agree on much of anything beside on the fact that they do not agree on much of anything. My brother goes along anyway. He tends to tell me about the most important things upon return, so that I am informed even without having been present.”

“Yes, I’ve seen him there,” Jarl Selwyn says, chipping another piece of wood away.

“Well, while Tyrion may be easy to miss thanks to his height, he is rather standing out for other matters,” Jaime chuckles softly, his heart feeling with a cold-hot feeling that always floods him when he thinks about his brother. While his twin sister is gone for good now, away from Casterly Rock, to not further torment his dwarfish brother, the mere thought of knowing Tyrion alone in his father’s
hands is making the older brother worried for the imp.

Jarl Tywin, for all his coldness and analytical thinking, has a very dark side to himself that he seems to pour exclusively over his imperfectly perfect son whose life began when that of his mother ended, forever marking Tyrion as the one who tore the one person the coldblooded Jarl Tywin likely ever truly loved and cared for away from him. And while Jaime mostly succeeds in stepping in before it gets too bad, he knows by now that his very absence means danger for his younger brother.

*Ever the more a reason not to be here, but back home. Why won’t anyone understand that even Kingslayers have families to care for?*

“We had a very fruitful discussion some time back. For a young man, your brother is very wise already,” Selwyn says, bringing a small smile to Jaime’s lips.

It’s rare enough to hear someone talking about his brother in a favorable way. Normally, they tie it to his different physique and drinking habits, but not once to his undeniable wit and worth.

“Too wise for his own good at times, but yes, for what he lacks in height, my little brother makes up with wit and the ability to drink more mead than anyone in the world likely ever could,” Jaime chuckles, shaking out his wrists as he keeps twisting on the chair.

“Yes, I’ve seen that, too,” Selwyn agrees, his lips twisting into a faint smile. “And Jarl Tywin does not insist that you go along anyway?”

“Oh, he *does* insist, but we are both at a stage where we recognize that he only has *me* as a choice for heir, because Jarl Tywin will not name my little brother heir in a thousand years. That means he *needs* me in that way. So, if my Father wants to keep me, he has to give me some freedoms that I take for myself. Such as not attending the *althings.*”

It’s a constant game of tug-of-war, where to men will sit on the ground, pulling on a loop to make the other man fall over. And that was a game their forefathers played already, and their forefathers before them.

It’s always war.

It’s always fight.

*Apparentely, that is what eternity looks like, and isn’t that oh so sweet?*

“And why don’t you like attending them?” Jarl Selwyn asks.

“I don’t fancy spending days with whispers in my back and no one taking a word I say seriously. I have enough of that already at the Rock, or anywhere else I go for that matter,” Jaime says, rolling his shoulders to feign nonchalance.

When you are marked as the Kingslayer, a backstabber, of that Jaime is aware, people are unlikely to listen to you, even if you are speaking the truth. Back at the Rock, his father and his dark reputation cast a big enough shadow to have the people heel if need be, but Jaime can’t bring himself to bother to go to those *althings,* only to see the same faces, the same grimaces of misgiving that he saw after he slew the King. Then he rather spends his time making sure he sees about the people at his home, and so the Gods will, he will succeed to his father’s honor as jarl, but Jaime won’t wait for the approval of the other jarls.

*The lion does not concern himself with the opinion of the sheep.*
“Well, you are not the only one who isn’t taken seriously most of his time,” the jarl says, his eyes fixed on the chunk of wood in his hand as he twists to inspect it.

“I suppose, for me, it’s the scourge of Kingslayers that we aren’t taken seriously in our quests and promises. Who’d trust a backstabber, right? And in your case, from what I gathered, it is also the scourge of men suggesting things that threaten to break conventions. People are like chain links, they don’t want to come apart, so you will keep biting iron, I’d assume.”

Jaime gives his chains a jolt for emphasis.

“Perhaps, though that doesn’t hinder me from attending anyway. And anyway, I have a strong jaw,” Selwyn argues with a hint of a smile tugging at his lips. “How else will there be change?”

*There won’t ever be change, because people are too comfortable in the terror so long it doesn’t affect them,* Jaime wants to say, but then does not.

But it is that simple.

The seer back at the Rock already said it often enough: The future is long since foretold, and they just live through it until the very end the Gods have decided, if they did. The only way not to fall into an abyss of nothingness is to gain glory, is to renown oneself. Through raid and fight. Through war.

If you do not succeed, you will be forgotten.

You fade away.

You become nothing.

And Jaime himself is not yet sure what is better: Sitting at Odin’s table with the same whispers in his back, or fall into sweet nothingness, where even those murmurs cannot carry to.

“And then you possess a kind of patience I lost long time ago,” Jaime replies, pulling himself back to the living instead of the dead.

“I don’t know if it’s patience or just the inability to give up. Perhaps I should,” Selwyn says with a sad smile, cutting another chip of wood away, giving the thing more and more shape as though he was trying to peel something out of the pine that only he can see just yet.

Jaime curls his lips into a frown. “Why would you think that?”

“Why would I share that with you, Kingslayer?” the other man huffs.

Jaime laughs at that. “I am your prisoner. Who would I tell?”

“Your Father, as soon as you are back with him. We are all aware around here that you are a prisoner only for a time. Despite the fact that you seemingly use any opportunity to get out ever faster, which does seem to prove that you lack patience indeed,” the jarl tells him.

“Oh, I pride myself being a hotspur, Jarl,” Jaime chuckles. “Though I agree, you may have a point there. It would be strategically unwise to share such vital information with Jarl Tywin’s son of all people. Yet again… I still tend to believe that even if you were to let me go, my Father wouldn’t deem you important enough to annihilate you. No offense.”

“No offense taken. I’d quite like things to stay just that way,” the Jarl says, only to look at him with a strange sort of expression Jaime fails to read. “But anyway, if that is what you think, you seemingly
have some important lessons to learn, still.”

Jaime’s lips curl into a frown. “About what?”

“Just because there is no need to annihilate someone, a village, a town, a city, doesn’t mean someone won’t do it anyway. Some people do it because they think they have to, even if they don’t. Some people do it because they can. Some claim to do it for the Gods. Some claim to do it to earn their seats at Odin’s table. Some do it to demonstrate their power, only in this very world we call our own. They do it for their capriciousness. Their determination to follow through with a threat… There are too many reasons why and far too few of why not,” Selwyn tells him, his voice full of bitterness.

“So, am I to trust in a man’s lack of capriciousness? Lack of malice? Lack of need for prestige? The wish to sit at Odin’s table? To gain renown? Power? Because, in my experience, no one is absent of either of them. And it just takes the right movement to tilt the cup over and spill the mead out.”

Jaime swallows thickly, licking his lips. “You may have a point there.”

“I may not be as powerful as your father, I may not even have his wit, but my past has taught me some lessons about men the likes of him, and I tend to be careful around them. Because they are not known for their charitability,” the Jarl goes on.

“I am not the mirror image of my father,” Jaime argues, surprising himself with the sudden force that statement comes with. What does he care whether the jarl thinks of him as a younger version of the Jarl of the Rock? Isn’t it serving his interest to have those people believe that he is as dangerous as Tywin Lannister?

Just why do I care to convince him of this? Why do I care at all?

“But you may grow to be one. Just like anyone. It simply takes the right push, the right pull,” the jarl sighs. “For all of it to come spill out into the world, never to be found again.”

“ Might be,” Jaime exhales, rolling his shoulders as he feels tension rise in them.

“Which is why we will keep you until the althing has taken place. That is safest for our people. While Jarl Tywin is not known for being a very charitable man, he is one of reason, and unless you give him reason, he will not break a treaty made, or so in my experience,” Selwyn ponders.

“You do know him a bit after all,” Jaime muses.

A lot of people get far too intimidated by Jarl Tywin’s cold-bloodedness, failing to see that behind that stoic mask hides a man whose reputation is far bigger than himself, who also bleeds when you cut him, who lost love to grief. And apparently, the jarl is, despite his unreasonable choices in private matters, rather reasonable when it comes to matters of politics, which makes Jaime’s father the kind of antagonist you can deal with if you know how to handle him and meet him with reason rather than impulsivity.

“Well, that is what happens when you see a man at least once a year,” Selwyn tells him, continuing to chip at the piece of wood in his hand. “You get to know one another, over time. Whether you want to or not.”

Jaime licks his lips. “May I ask a question?”

“You can ask, but I guarantee no answer,” Selwyn replies, cocking an eyebrow at him.

“You aren’t native to these lands, are you?” Jaime questions, but the older man cuts in before he can finish the thought, “We are not from here, no. It was a long way for us to arrive at this place and
build a new home, but that is not really a question, is it?”

“Not really, after all, you bear in your name the echo of an isle in the Narrow Sea,” Jaime agrees. “The question is rather… what happened to the old home exactly, other than that it was overtaken?”

He only ever heard about it that the Sapphire Isle that once stood proud and strong was overtaken by foreign forces. However, by that time, Jaime had little care to give as he found his entire world collapsing, following his act of treason to the King. Strangely so, no one seemed to even want to make mention of the fact that this is the same man whose reputation cast a great shadow. And while Jaime stopped thinking about that most curious case after some time when worry for his own people grew to be the center of his attention, he always wondered how the echo of a man could fade away, only to come ringing again from stranger shores, but much smaller, much humbler, and a lot quieter.

Jaime watches as the jarl cranes his neck, lets his eyes drift away from the wood to glance out the small window to his left, trying to find something outside that he seemingly cannot fathom inside. “That is a story by now, a myth.”

Jaime grimaces.

*What is that supposed to mean?*

“Will you share that myth with me?” he asks cautiously. Selwyn tears his glance back to meet Jaime’s, and the son of Tywin can’t help but note that this man bears a similar kind of strength in his eyes like his daughter has it in her big, blue orbs, full of willpower and stubbornness.

The two look at each other for a long moment, silence stretching between them until Jaime understands the very message hiding in the lack of words. “I assume not, then.”

Selwyn starts cutting the wood again. “I’d advise you not to ask my daughter about those matters. She will not just treat you with silence, I may warn you.”

“I already guessed that she’d rather hit me for it,” Jaime chuckles. “The way she always does.”

*That seems to be her new favorite thing in life!*

“She will have to bear those wounds of the myth for longer than I will have to,” Selwyn says with a sad grimace, his eyes fixed on the wood, running one calloused thumb over the smoothed surface. “I won’t last longer than her, so the Gods will. And that means she will carry these scars for many years still to come.”

“I suppose that is the scourge we all share in,” Jaime mutters silently, averting his gaze. “Strangely uniting, isn’t it?”

For that the woman seems to pride herself in being so much unlike him, Jaime can’t help but think that they share something after all, if only the different set of scars, leaving skin unmarked, but lips sealed with invisible thongs.

For her, it seems to be for where she came and why she had to go.

For him, it is what drove him to take a sword and run it through Aerys’ back to watch the life bleed out of the madman.

“Oh, certainly. You all will bear the scars of your forefathers and mothers, over to the next generations, the pain that comes with war. The suffering that comes with revenge after revenge… It’s a pain that never ends,” Selwyn agrees solemnly.
“Well, according to some, that is what will give us honor, too,” Jaime sighs. “That we endure that pain and gain glory in battle against those very hardships.”

“I tend to think that a man is only as honorable as the honor he gives to himself. I don’t care for how honorable or dishonorable your father may be, so long you act this way or the other,” Selwyn tells him, which tends to surprise Jaime yet again. “I don’t believe in a guilt that carries past one’s own life, and neither do I believe in the echo of greatness of another man. Our actions define us, not that of our fathers and mothers, but only ever our own.”

This may be one of the few people who actually seem to place more value on the action than the name, which is a rarity in these times most definitely.

“Well, you may be one among few to think that way,” Jaime exhales wearily.

“I tend to pride myself not thinking what everyone else has on mind,” Selwyn says with a smile tugging at his lips that doesn't reach his eyes, his hands resuming the work of smoothing out the wood in his hand.

“As you should,” Jaime chuckles. “Most people are achingly dumb.”

“They are, but that is also because they don’t get taught any better,” Selwyn argues. “They are taught about the glory of war rather than its horror. They are taught that raiding for the sake of one’s own renown is a good thing, a thing to strive for. They don’t get taught what the inevitable consequence of raids is that someone else loses his or her home and loved ones… until they suffer through the same destiny, once someone comes who is stronger, who is better, and has more resources and weapons the others cannot compete against, no matter their bravery, no matter their courage or honor.”

“Oh, now you want to educate the masses, too! No wonder that you bear that scourge, Jarl Selwyn. You are far too revolutionary. Our people change very slowly, or not all, shall I rather say?” Jaime says with a lazy, weary smile.

It is those truths that get spoken over chipped wood and to a man wrapped in chains rendered silent that seem to hold more significance than most speeches ever given at an althing for all Jaime can remember ever came to bear.

It is the kind of invisible thong worn by those who know their truths don’t matter.

Because here sits a jarl who lays it all out, his fingers coated in wood dust, dressed in simple garbs, growing and earning his own livelihood, with a kind of calmness that Jaime almost finds admirable.

And yet, no one hears him.

And yet, his echo does not carry far.

And yet, he still casts a greater shadow than most ever will.

“As our seer always says, it only takes the right impulse to make us turn a new direction,” Selwyn goes on to say. “For us, that happened sooner than it did for most others. Which is both a curse and a fortune, I’d assume.”

“Well, I suppose that for our people to listen to reason… some many impulses are needed, still,” Jaime replies with a sigh.

And likely, it will take at least Ragnarök two times over until people will even try to act reasonably,
he thinks to himself, shaking his head, which makes Jaime wince at the pull on the tender flesh of his throat.

“And so we will have to keep pushing,” Selwyn says, cutting away at the piece of wood again.

“I really don’t have the patience for that, I am sorry,” Jaime chuckles softly, if bitterly. He long since gave up on the vain hope of changing people’s perception, let alone minds. Jaime succumbed himself to the pain and reality of that pain that he will forever be known as the Kingslayer, will never enjoy people’s good faith, let alone trust.

“I can’t blame you for that. I can blame you for other things, but not for not wanting to fight that battle. It’s likely futile anyway, but the Gods have said something to us all, to me in particular, back when one life ended a new began. And I just abide their will, hoping that this is the path they want me to travel to earn myself a place in Odin’s great halls,” Selwyn tells him. Jaime’s eyes drift back to the wooden piece in his hand, which shifted shape into that of a wolf’s head.

“We will only ever know once we stand before the portal and are granted or denied access,” Jaime replies, leaning back on the chair slightly. “If such a thing even exists…”

“And what do you think will earn you access?” Selwyn asks.

“I hope my good looks will work in my favor,” the younger man snorts. “But I tend not to think of it. I rather stay in the here and now. The past and future are far too nebulous as of late, and one should be weary of navigating one’s ship not only across unknown seas, but particularly on those cloaked in the fogs of mystery. You are bound to run aground.”

And he should know, because that is what Jaime let happen by following uncertain futures in the hopes to gain a real one for his own people, before Winter comes.

“You may have the rights of it in that regard, Kingslayer,” the jarl agrees. “Which is likely why you are still so focused on fleeing from this village instead of planning that bit into the nebulous future of a few moons away.”

He gives Jaime a playful if stern look.

At least he has more humor than his daughter happens to have. Which begs the question how comes she is so sour in spirit when her father is not, after all, the wench takes so much after that man.

Jaime licks his lips, before he answers, “As I said, it’s in my nature.”

“I don’t take foolery to be part of your nature.”

“I don’t call it foolery, I tend to call it not being made to fit a cage,” Jaime tells him. “But you see, that is what keeps me wondering.”

“About what?” Selwyn asks.

“You are aware that I will keep trying to escape, no matter how risky that may be. And kill someone if I must?” Jaime goes on, finding his own mood shift away from nonchalance to a matter pressing heavy on his mind during the many hours he spends only in his own company.

Selwyn nods slowly. “Yes, I am aware.”

“Then why do you keep me around your daughter?”
Jaime would understand it if this was his father demanding that of his child, assigning some foolish task to Tyrion to see him fail to “teach him a valuable lesson,” or telling Jaime to do some deed in secret because he is “the only one” he can trust, as it was before he sailed away from the Rock. However, for all Jaime can see, this Jarl has nothing but tender feelings for his daughter in his heart, and if Jaime is not mistaken, and he rarely is, that man would rather die than know his daughter in danger. Yet, Jarl Selwyn leaves Brienne exposed not just to Jaime’s fast fingers to grab her rear to tease the wench relentlessly, but actually to losing her life, a life he likely holds even dearer than she herself does.

“Because she is most capable. The youths are still too untrained to handle a warrior of your prowess and skill. Don’t think I haven’t heard of the raids you led and their apparent success, Kingslayer. The older, experienced men are needed elsewhere… and have no great intention of ensuring your safety. Just like I am aware that even the most trustworthy man can be bought with gold and riches I am sure you’d promise them, or threaten them with, this way or the other. And it is essential that you are returned to your kin to guarantee the safety of the village under my care. My daughter can do it, so I trust her,” Selwyn explains. “It’s just that simple.”

“Well, maybe you put too much faith in her. Perhaps it’d be better to spare one of the men after all, if you have any intention of protecting her….” Jaime means to say, but that is when Selwyn grabs him roughly by the chin, his arm snapping across the table faster than a snake can strike. Jaime stares at the imposing man looming above him, looking like a Storm King from the old tales.

“I protect my daughter with all I have. I would give my life for her, any day, any time. Don’t think that just because I entrust you into her care that I am not in fear about her. Don’t you dare question my devotion to protect my last living child, or else…,” he snarls, pressing harder into Jaime’s chin. He can already feel the bruises forming there. “Do we understand each other?”

“Perfectly,” Jaime manages to say.

Selwyn lets go at once and sits back down, rubbing his bad leg. “I would do it all by myself, but I cannot. She is my only living daughter, the only one whose support I know I can always be certain of. She does not doubt me, but others might. And my choice of keeping you here is not well-received. And yes, that means taking a risk for my daughter, but only for the sake of keeping her safe from what your father may do to her, to all of us, if given the right offense.”

“I… meant no offense,” Jaime replies, twisting his aching jaw. “I meant it as… a warning, because yes, I will keep trying. I will do it because I have to. So I advise you…”

However, before Jaime can end his sentence, Brienne’s father jumps in, “Your advice is not needed, neither is it wanted, Kingslayer.”

“… Thought so.”

“My advice to you, by contrast, would be to simply wait until the althing takes place. Then you wouldn’t have to stain your already tainted sense of honor with having killed an innocent woman you seemingly have no wish to kill,” the Jarl tells him.

Jaime leans his head to the side slightly. “Perhaps I would, if I didn’t have the bad feeling that your men are in more and more of an uproar, Jarl Selwyn. I hear the whispers whenever your daughter drags me across the marketplace. They want my blood. They want to make money with my ransom. No matter what you tell them, they will keep thinking that. Because, deep down, they are still raiders, because that is in their blood, even if you seemingly do no longer raid around here. And it’s still some time until the althing. I just hold my life more precious than hers. Can you judge me for that?”
“You are safe with us,” the older man declares.

“Am I?” Jaime scoffs. “How would you guarantee that none of the youths creep into the house one night, cut open my throat, and see what color the blood of a Lannister has? After your own admission, they are not particularly fond of me and cannot be trusted for long to look after an evil Kingslayer like me. How do you ensure my safe return home if you have only your daughter to rely on? Why wouldn’t they use the first best chance to attack me and see what the Lannisters are actually made of?”

It took the trickster just one night to bring the rage of the God of Thunder upon himself, by cutting off some golden locks from said god’s wife. And Jaime has no intention to just idly sit by while the youths or older men sharpen their knives and steal into the chamber while Brienne is fast asleep to get over with the deed, bury his body where no one can find it, and move on.

Because Jaime has a mission to fulfill, however futile, however far away. And those men won’t keep him from it. For that, it is too important, far too important.

“Because then they’d have to get past me first,” Brienne’s voice rings out as she whirls inside, a basket full with some red plant under her arm. “You are my prisoner. By implication, this means that you are under my protection, too.”

Jaime turns to her slightly, rewarding her with a misgiving smile. “You do a lousy job at protecting me, then.”

“You are still alive, are you not?” she huffs, unimpressed.

Jaime opens his mouth to reply, but then finds himself mute. He gives the woman a good look-over, realizing only now that her breeches are drenched as well as her sleeves.

“Maggy’s been asking for you, Father. It might be she had a vision, though she wouldn’t tell me,” Brienne says, turning her attention away from Jaime. “I assume it might be for the best to seek her out some time of the day. She was surprisingly serious about the matter.”

Selwyn nods his head as he stuffs the wooden piece into his pocket. “Will you want to stay by the house now or do you still need to go somewhere else?”

“No, I have to dry these,” Brienne replies. “I watered the animals already before sun rose, so I will be busy around the house anyway.”

“Then I will see her right away,” Selwyn tells her. “She always gets furious when you don’t answer her calls straight away.”

“Take Moon with you. She will help you walk down,” Brienne advises him.

“I know,” he sighs, seemingly appreciating being lectured like that as little as Jaime does.

“And send her back up again to the ledge further down the hill,” Brienne goes on anyway. “The mothers have been talking again when Moon circulated too closely to the village. One woman still claims that she ate one of her goats, as though she’d do that. She’s never owned more than three, the dumb goose.”

“I know, my dear daughter,” the jarl says as he gets up, testing his leg a few times before hobbling over to the door. Once he comes to stand next to Brienne, Selwyn gives her broad shoulder a gentle squeeze.
“Be safe,” he says.

“You, too.”

With that, the jarl goes outside. From the corner of his eye, Jaime can see the silvery furred wolf leaping over with the silent grace of a shadow to offer stability for a man who seems unshaken in his views, but nevertheless in a failing body. Together, the two start to make their way down the hill, whereas that lazy wolf who likes to lick his face so very much has no better to do than roll on his back to let the sun warm his belly. Jaime snaps his attention back to the wench. “So? What have you been up to without me? Other than feeling lonely?”

“I had a splendid day,” Brienne replies, carrying the basket over to the table, which makes a wet smacking sound as it hits the wooden surface. Jaime wrinkles his nose.

“What is that?” he asks, making a face.

“You don’t know?” Brienne questions, looking at him with honest confusion.

“I wouldn’t ask if I knew what this is,” Jaime scoffs, to which she rolls her eyes. “Just what do they teach you at the Rock? Or don’t they at all?”

“Well, apparently not what by Odin’s beard that stuff is,” Jaime huffs, nodding at the dripping basket.

“That’s Dulse.”

“Ah, that explains it of course,” Jaime snorts, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

“Really?” she huffs.

“No,” he retorts, rolling his eyes.

“It’s an alga.”

Jaime tilts his head to the side as he eyes the thing more closely. “And it’s good for something?”

“You already ate it. That’s what it’s good for,” Brienne points out to him, to which Jaime almost shouts, “What? When?”

“Sometime this week,” Brienne answers, rolling her broad shoulders with nonchalance. “I mix it with the stew every once in a while.”

“Algae, ha. Well, at least it’s red,” Jaime says, leaning back in his chair again. “Not Lannister red, but still red enough to give me a bit of a feeling of being at home.”

Brienne gathers some pieces of cloth she lays out on the table before swinging herself down on one of the stools, pushing some of the wood chips away that her father left scattered on the table and the ground. She grabs into the basket and pulls out the red, sloppy algae, flopping left and right in her hand, looking as though it was alive, still.

“And what is that supposed to do now?” Jaime asks.

“You dry them, then you eat them,” Brienne explains, holding up one and wriggling it close to his face a few times. “Or would you rather eat it like that?”

“I think I will pass,” Jaime answers, making a face of disgust.
“For a man who comes from the coast, you seem to know little about the sea,” Brienne points out to him, taking the alga back down to let it fall on the cloth with a wet smacking sound.

“That is because I don’t go diving for algae. I mean Dulse. When I jump into the water, I do so because I want to take a bath or swim through the ocean. Well, and other than that, I enjoy the comfort of being on a ship, where I don’t have to bother about algae,” Jaime grumbles. “And isn’t that something you only have around here?”

“No, it grows almost anywhere where there is water coming from the sea,” Brienne says. “We had it back home, too. You could find them on almost every shore around the isle. It was… until…”

Jaime tilts his head to the side as she stops for a moment, bowing her head as she continues dabbing the alga in front of her. And that is when he sees that the jarl most definitely has the rights of it – the children bear the scars, too, invisible on the skin, but nevertheless working like thongs sealing your lips shut, taking the language away from you to express your pain.

Jaime licks his lips. “… You seemed quite happy about having gotten a chance to dig for algae. Is it that you are a creature of the water?”

“… One could say so,” Brienne replies meekly, averting her gaze. “I grew up… on an island, so it seems to come naturally to the likes of us.”

“Your Father already warned me not to ask about the matter,” Jaime says. “I am actually trying to… lead away from the topic, if not very successfully, I will admit.”

Brienne tears her gaze up to meet his for a long moment before she focuses on the algae again.

“… I like it a lot. I have a small ship I sometimes use, though lately, I didn’t have much time to sail,” Brienne says, seemingly glad to jump on something else but the scars that don’t show on the skin. “Father had it built for me. He whittled the decorations for it. He is much better at this than I am. Even if he never learns to clean up after he is done.”

Her eyes briefly fall back on the abandoned piece of carved pine wood her father left before taking his leave.

“What? There is something you are not the best at?” Jaime laughs softly.

“There are many things I am no good at. Whittling is one of them. I can make a decent spear if need be, but I am not artistic in that way,” Brienne admits.

In general, Brienne doesn’t pride herself as someone of the fine art. She knows how to weave, she knows how to sew, how to make a spear, but the things she makes, almost incidentally, are always rather plain, as though to match herself, as though something as ugly as her could never bring something forth that is of true beauty.

“Hm, I pride myself not being the almost bad at the task,” Jaime chuckles.

“You whittle?” Brienne asks, tilting her head, and it is during those moments that Jaime almost feels like a guest and not just a prisoner. That curiosity in her eyes is genuine, and Jaime can’t recall the last time someone showed honest curiosity in him as a person, less so in him being able to whittle or not.

He nods his head with a smirk tugging at his lips. “That is apparently something even us spoiled jarl’s sons get to do with our own two hands, yes.”
“What did you make?” Brienne keeps asking, her eyes downcast as they focus on the algae, though Jaime can tell that he now enjoys the rest of her attention.

“Spears, daggers… obviously, I assume. I once made a hobbyhorse for my brother when we were still children. He really liked that one, though he may just have been overjoyed by the attention that got him. He was rather small by the time anyway. Not that he is much taller now…,” Jaime says, looking rather pensively as the memories flood into his mind like water. “I made some jewelry, too. But that was about it.”

“Jewelry? To impress young, frail maidens?” Brienne teases. Which is still rather surprising coming from this uptight warrior wench.

Though certainly, it’s the kind of surprises Jaime tends to appreciate. It makes him feel less out of place, and it opens up the space wherein he can speak and is not rendered silent by invisible thongs.

“Oh, I don't have to give them jewelry to impress them,” Jaime says with a grin.

“You certainly believe your looks suffice to make the women swoon,” she huffs.

“It happened!” Jaime insists, laughing.

“You certainly believe your looks suffice to make the women swoon,” she huffs.

“Right,” she snorts, rolling her eyes at him.

He laughs. “You don’t believe me!”

“Why would I believe you much of anything?” Brienne questions.

And truly, why would she? Not long ago, the man was willing to murder her, and to this day, she is quite sure that the son of Jarl Tywin is about as good as his father is at hiding away, disguising truths, and lying without a hint showing on his face.

That just seems to run in the family, or so I have heard.

“Well, even if not, I have other qualities,” Jaime argues.

She cocks an eyebrow at him. “Do you?”

“Well, I am clever. I am a good general. I am rich?” Jaime recounts.

“As are many jarls’ sons. That is hardly an outstanding quality,” Brienne points out to him, her hands steadily working on the algae, spreading parts of the seat across the table until it’s all painted in dark red.

“I am charming,” Jaime goes on.

“But only if you want to be, I assume. Because you weren’t really charming for all I could see,” Brienne snorts.

“Oh, I could be much more charming to you,” Jaime says, wriggling an eyebrow at her, to which she does no more than narrow her eyes at him, saying, “I bet someone like you is having the thralls and willing maidens over at the Rock by the dozen.”

“You do me no justice, woman,” Jaime argues with a wicked kind of grin. “I am a very devoted man. I take one at a time, and then I take the time with each and every one of them. I wouldn’t want to leave them disappointed, so I take thorough care of their needs and desires until they are sated in
their relentless appetite for me.”

Which is far from the truth, but Jaime is well aware that this is what people assume about him alongside all the rest, being a man of dishonor, being this, being that. So why not have the wench believe in that kind of reputation, if only to see her blush and squirm as a result?

“Ah, so that’s it. Your one rewarding quality, to you, is that you pride yourself being exceptional in bed. And the women know it just by looking at you,” Brienne huffs, smacking another alga on the table with a wet slapping noise.

“It made the round after some time. You know how the women gossip,” Jaime says, waving his hand, ignoring the jolt of pain that is sent up his spine thereafter.

“I don’t gossip.”

“That is because you are too much around members not of your own sex,” Jaime snorts. “Though I guess that you feel most familiar among them, huh?”

“Well, perhaps that is a fortune,” Brienne retorts. “How does it go? Some people like to overpraise a name. So I tend to not give too much on gossip.”

“You only say so because you haven’t tried it yet,” Jaime huffs, smirking at her smugly. “And before you get angry with me, let me remind you that you are the one who brought this up.”

“It’s not like you wouldn’t have brought this up on your own at some point,” Brienne scowls. “Whether I had said something or not.”

“True again,” he agrees, chuckling softly. “But really, I can only recommend myself. I make them all scream and squeal my name as I let them ride my cock.”

“So much to how I don’t do you any justice,” Brienne huffs, waving another alga around in the air before smacking it down on the table.

“As I said, one at a time, and I always treat them well, exceptionally well, considering what I let them feel and how I satisfy all of their needs,” Jaime says with a dark grin. “And think about it like this: I am to wed at some point. What a disappointment would I be to my future wife if I was slouch underneath the furs? I feel sorry for all the women getting wed off to men lacking any kind of experience. They can be lucky when the man finds the right hole upon first try… or even if not, realize at some point that it’s not the right hole.”

The wench is an easy target after all. Already this has Brienne blushing shades of red matching that to the algae she keeps spreading on the table. And isn’t that oh so sweet?

“It’s always a relief to know that you are so concerned with your future wife’s pleasure,” Brienne replies, trying her best to keep her voice leveled, disinterested, cold, and distant all at once. “Who is the oh so lucky one?”

“Hm? Oh, that’s not out yet,” Jaime replies.

“Not out yet?” Brienne repeats with a frown.

She reckoned that the likes of Jaime would have the jarls all across the Westerlands line up before Casterly Rock to present to Jarl Tywin only their best daughters. In fact, she wouldn’t have been surprised if he was already wed. After all, his services to the King he slew are long since over and he is certainly at a marriageable age.
“No arrangement fitted yet. There once was talk about Lysa Tully, but that was before I joined the Kingsguard. By now, she seems to be unhappily happy with that old man Jon Arryn, who will likely only ever die with his shrunken cock inside her. Poor thing,” Jaime says, shaking his head. “Ever since… well, I suppose Father is waiting for a suitable match to turn up. And apparently, favorable wives are rare these days. At least as for those bringing a good bride-price to convince my Father of their worthiness. He arranged likely the most suitable match for his daughter in Robert Baratheon, but other than that… how do you match a marriage to one of the most powerful jarls if there are none of the female equivalent for your son to spare?”

“I bet there is some jarl’s daughter who will have the right bride-price to offer,” Brienne snorts.

“Presumably,” Jaime agrees, rolling his shoulders despite the pain it gives him. “The old man is getting anxious. I am not getting younger, after all. And he wants many children for his empire meant to last a thousand years.”

*Though at this rate, it may not make it through the upcoming Winter…*

“So you only marry out of duty,” Brienne translates.

He shrugs. “Well, it would be nice if she weren’t a complete fool.”

“And not absolutely hideous, I assume,” she adds, rolling her eyes.

“That would be nice, but… oh well, so long she has a strong character…,” Jaime says, though this time she interrupts him disbelievingly, “*Right.*”

“You don’t believe me? You do me yet again no justice!” he cries out playfully.

“So, you would wed a truly hideous woman, so long she had the right character and bride-price to show?” Brienne questions, not buying only just a single word of it.

Because that is the scoundrel of Kingslayers, too. No one wants to believe them, even if nothing but the truth slips from their tongues.

“Well, the bride-price is important for my Father foremost. I could care less about it. I assume that’d be enough to make him see past some ungainly exterior, despite his efforts of arranging the perfect match for me – a woman carved out of a lion’s tooth, with fair hair, fair skin, fair, fair, *fair*, petite in frame, the perfect housewife, coming with a big bride-price and the willingness to give it all for the Lannister family. Oh yes, and noble birth would be nice, too, I suspect. Well, that, and prolific hips to bear at least a dozen children for his precious empire.”

“*Curiously*, not many women of that sort run around,” Brienne says, smacking another alga down on the table.

“Precisely,” Jaime agrees, nodding his head. “Which is why I suppose I can well live with cutting out the fair bits and only focus on the stuff that seems more doable. I am more of a realist after all.”

“Well, leaves one wondering whether that’s a fortune or misfortune,” Brienne replies more or less in a sing-song.

“Any woman can count herself lucky to have me in bed,” Jaime snickers.

“For that, they have to deal with you, though, even outside the bed,” Brienne retorts.

“Well, you deal with me, too, and up to this day, my cock has gotten no attention from you
whatevsoever, and that despite the fact that we both know you’d want to give it a try, get a feel for it, before you marry some boring slápr who will likely only find the right hole upon third try, at best.”

Jaime screws his eyes shut when something sloppy slap against his face at full force. He doesn’t have to open his eyes to know that it’s one of her stupid algae that Brienne smacked right across his face as she pushed up from the chair in a fury.

“What was now more offensive about that comment than anything I already said until now that you slap me with algae, wench?!” Jaime snaps.

Brienne says nothing at that, just motions over to the hearth, bending down to poke at the flames with a stick next resting beside it.

Jaime shakes his head so that the alga falls to the ground with a wet plop. The more he lets that thought sink in, the clearer it becomes to Jaime – yet another spot to attack without relent. *After all, this world is war.*

“Did your Father arrange marriage with some slápr like that now or what?” he goes on to ask.

“That is none of your concern,” Brienne hisses, not rewarding him with only just a look, instead keeping her big blue eyes on the flames, painting them milky shades of jade.

“So it’s true!” Jaime howls, tapping his left foot on the ground.

“No,” she grounds out, nostrils flaring.

“You only say that because it is your concern,” Jaime argues, taking delight in her discomfort, taking delight in yet another way to attack, to fight back, fight for his freedom.

“If you want to believe that,” she hisses.

Jaime turns on his chair, flashing the most ridiculous smile he can muster with the amount of pain it causes him to turn that way, thanks to the little leash that leaves him with. “So? Who is he? Some low jarl’s son? The second son? A karl? Or is your father as daring as he appears to be and wants to set a sign by having you wed a thrall?”

No answer comes from her other than her silent misgiving, but Jaime is fueled now.

“Is he tall? Is he small? Oh, imagine what a small, lean guy would do when you two climb under the furs! You’d *crush* him between your meaty thighs, no doubt! Though that may be fortune for you. You collect the money, and then marry again!” Jaime laughs, throwing his head back for emphasis, trying his best to keep up the charade.

“If you want more *Dulse* in your face, we can very well arrange for that, Kingslayer,” Brienne snarls.

*And there is that name again. It was only a matter of time anyway until it’d come from her lips again.*

“Is he good-looking?” Jaime keeps teasing, the anger of his nickname having re-evaded that space only giving more fuel to his jests. “Did you two exchange some kisses already? Huh? Oh, or did he get some bargain by stroking you down there first?”
Brienne says nothing.

“Or is that he is a slouch, hm?” Jaime goes on, trying to coax the usual reactions out of her, if not more potent ones, granted that this seems to get to her in particular.

“In which case, you really may want to take the offer before he bores you out of your mind once you share bed,” Jaime continues. “You can go wild with me, and I will make you wild in turn, wild with ecstasy, wild with need and desire, so that for when you are tamed, your appetite will be sated for some years to come that it’d likely take that man to ever get anywhere close to pleasuring you.”

Again, the wench says nothing, just sticks at the fire as though it was it was his face right in the flames she’d mean to stab with the sick in hand.

“I can have you go wild in whatever way you want, so long you give me some space to move and ask me nicely, wench, right now. I can fuck you with my fingers if you don’t want your maidenhead to take any damage, until you are writhing mess, begging me for more. Or I can lick your cunt until you are as sloppy and sopping wet as that Dulse of yours. Or I can fuck you in all earnest until you until you forget that stupid fool you are to wed to somehow save the family’s fortune. All you have to do is to give me a bit of leash.”

However, yet again, Jaime is met by silence.

“Oh well, you shouldn’t fear. Even if the husband won’t satisfy your needs, you can always set your own hand to it, wench. And if you don’t know how that works, I’d be more than open to teach you just those arts to help you through a displeasing winter of marriage sure to come even though you likely won’t come.”

Jaime still has only silence brushing against him. He turns his head slightly to catch a glimpse of her, standing in his back, and it is only then that he sees the glistening of tears in her big blue eyes.

The wench surely knows how to destroy my fun.

Because it is no fun to tease her into freeing him of his chains when the dumb bitch is crying like a small girl. Jaime may be a bastard, but not that kind of bastard. Needless to mention that it may be unwise to attack a wound without relent that may have her lose her patience far more than he can bear, wrapped in chains. That woman’s wrath may well mean his downfall the same way Brokk’s wish for revenge meant Loki’s painful silence for a long time to come.

“… But perhaps that slápr will prove me wrong and he isn’t the almost bad. And you can train him, think about it, wench. You brought your wolves to discipline, then I suppose you can do the same with a man. Most men are animals anyway,” Jaime tells her, his tone more peaceable this time.

Jaime can see her angrily rubbing at her eyes so not to show the tears that were on the verge of falling moments ago.

Yeah, no, it’s really no fun like that.

“And who knows? Maybe I am to share in your destiny. If that is you any comfort. Perhaps that perfect woman my Father seeks to find for me is an absolute slouch in bed, too. Then we both will have no choice but to set our hands to it. Maybe you will think of me as you stroke yourself, hm?” Jaime jokes halfheartedly.

Because truth be told, he honestly fears to be stuck with some woman not at all fitting his character. His father likely will not mind her temperament so long she has the right name, right bride-price, looks, affiliation, and prolific hips, whereas Jaime knows he will be stuck with that woman, no
mattered her temperament.

Well, still better than no wife at all, Jaime reckons. Because that is more than he would have had, had he remained in the services of the King he pledged allegiance to, until that decisive day when he shoved a sword through his back to put an end to many promises, including this one.

Brienne motions back to the table slowly, moving like a wounded animal with the eyes still set on the predator, refusing to lick its wounds before it’s safe, and lowers herself back down ever the slower. She picks up a cloth again to put the red algae on.

“Well, whoever your future husband may be, he won’t suffer hunger. That much is for certain. You know how to make food even out of algae,” Jaime continues.

Brienne looks at him for a long moment, and Jaime already fears that silence will remain his one companion, but then she opens her mouth in reply. “It’s not that uncommon to use. It tastes really good.”

“Well, I didn’t vomit when you put it in the stew, so I assume I have to take your word for it,” Jaime answers.

Brienne stands up from the chair again.

“Now don’t tell me you take offense in that again!” he grounds out.

“I am not,” Brienne retorts, only to come back with a wooden jar with a lid, which she opens to take out what looks like dried meat. The wench thrusts it into his palm before putting the jar away again.

“Is that the dried algae?” he asks.

“Yes.”

Jaime examines the thing in his hand, a frown forming on his face. “And you just eat it like that? Or do you want to poison me now?”

“If so, I would have poisoned myself just this morning when I ate it before I went out,” Brienne tells him.

“Well, then I guess I have to take your word for it,” Jaime says before he takes the dried thing into his mouth, and after a bit of chewing, he has to admit that it’s not the almost bad. While the texture is questionable, the taste is undeniably good. It tastes of sea water, of the ocean, sending him momentarily back to Casterly Rock’s waters and cliffs from which he jumped already as a child.

Which only reminds him of his own invisible scars that render him speechless, about how he wants to be home again, about how he wants to see his little brother again, wants to smell the familiar sea air, wants to be in a place that doesn’t always leave him silent, doesn’t leave him paining, leaves him free to move, and not confined to a life unlike his nature.

They sit in silence, the only noise being that of Brienne’s spreading out the rest of the algae, before she folds the cloth up to put back in the basket to leave the Dulse to dry in the sun.

“And what are we doing now?” Jaime asks.

“I am changing out of these clothes now.”

“Oh, so we are back to the old game of you stripping before me to let me catch glimpses of you? I
still wonder if that makes you wet, thinking about me watching you undress,” Jaime teases.

Brienne motions past him, giving the leash a small tug, still taking his breath away for a moment.
““You will stay right here. For what do I have these for, hm?”

“But what if I escape? What if I break free? Oh, the shame it’d bring you, wench!”

“Sun is just out the door. He’d bite you in the leg before you made it to the woods.”

“Not if I club him in the head first,” Jaime hollers.

“You can always give it a try, Kingslayer,” Brienne says, though this time, the name doesn’t hurt as much, because Jaime can hear the sarcasm in her words. And that itself makes the usage of that name far less painful.

“You could also give it a try to undress before me,” he calls after her.

“But you have to save yourself up for your future bride cut from a lion’s tooth, remember?” Brienne snorts, already walking over to her small chamber. Jaime laughs, leaning back on his chair, feeling slightly lightheaded, which is ridiculous in itself, getting drunk on those shreds of normalcy in this very travesty of an existence he currently lives through, as a prisoner to a lower jarl and particularly, his ungainly, stubborn daughter with stunning blue eyes.

Jaime closes his eyes as he hears the still moist clothes of hers slipping to the ground as she strips out of them, recalling the images of her exposed calves and her toned midsection he caught some days earlier. Which is ever the more ridiculous, though Jaime is likely just starved on affection, forcing him to feel appetite even for something as ridiculous as the wench’s attention instead of misgiving and the sight of those parts of her body that are not necessarily as ugly as one might think them to be, judging by her mannish exterior.

Just as he is about to imagine Brienne pulling down her breeches to allow him a glance at her thighs, the actual wench motions back into the room, now clad in her typical working dress, leaving way too much to imagination to Jaime’s liking. It was more fun when he could catch a glimpse of something for which he didn’t have to use his imagination at all. Jaime frowns when she pulls one of the stools over to sit down right next to him.

“Change of heart after all, wench?” he teases. “With a bit of leash, I could slip my hand under your skirt in no time, be sure of that.”

“I will pass.”

“Your loss, not mine.”

She puts down a small jar on the table, which Jaime can yet again do nothing but grimace at, only to almost jump once Brienne grabs his left arm, expecting to either be hit, pushed, or whatever that beast of a woman can come up for punishment.

*However, no punishment follows... yet.*

“Here is what is going to happen now: I will untie one of your wrists at a time, and if you move the wrong way only once, I will pull on the leash for your neck until you black out from the lack of air,” Brienne growls, her eyes narrow slits.

Jaime tilts his head to the side with a grin. “Oh, tough love, woman.”
“Did you understand me?” she hisses.

“Yes.”

“Good,” Brienne says, licking her lips. “You remember that. And once that is done, you will sleep in the muddy pen for the rest of your stay.”

“We had that before,” he snorts.

Brienne rolls her big blue eyes at him before she opens the cuff around his left wrist, slowly, very slowly, her eyes alert, her body on the verge of jumping to the task of defense if need be, though Jaime reckons an attempt of escape futile now. She is by far too alert right now. Needless to mention that he’d like to know what the wench might be up to if she wants to remove his chains for a time. It can never harm to get to know your enemy also in situations of less hostility.

Jaime grimaces once he sees the marred, inflamed skin of his wrist, which looks even worse in bright daylight. He can feel Brienne pressing down on his arm hard, fearing for him to make an attempt of slipping away, but once she feels no resistance coming from him, her grip eases, to the point of being almost tender as Brienne grabs his hand to turn his wrist around.

For that she has her father’s big paws, her touch is astonishingly tender.

With her free hand, Brienne removes the lid from the jar she brought along, revealing a greenish cream inside, along with a small swab made of linen. She dabs the cloth into the cream a few times before dappling his inflamed skin. Jaime hisses at the first contact, but her grip is made of iron, keeping him in place as she continues spreading the cream around his wrist, her movements steady and certain.

And surprisingly gentle.

“That will ensure that the inflammation wears down,” Brienne says, not meeting his gaze. “I’ve used it a number of times myself. Maggy’s ointments work miracles most of the time. We wouldn’t want you to earn yourself an infection, after all.”

Jaime blinks, suddenly lacking the words. The woman went to town not just to dive for some algae, but also to gather the cream from their wicked seer? Maybe he is not that much of a prisoner after all, if only for a time.

Once Brienne coated his wrist with the green paste, he can feel the easing, cooling effect brushing against his raw skin. Perhaps that wicked seer is not at all that bad either – at least her ointments don’t give him a rash, like the one did the seer back at the Rock gave to him some time back. Brienne wraps his wrist with strips of linen cloth, her fingers moving routinely, but almost feathery in touch so not to cause additional pain to his inflamed skin.

And for a man starved on affection, this feels like a piece of Valhall, like thongs finally coming off his lips, allowing him to breathe, to speak, even though he doesn’t say a word right at this moment.

Brienne continues working on his other wrist, then his neck, her grip always steady, always strong, but nonetheless tender and soft, so long eh gives her no reason to harden against him. And Jaime finds himself not wanting to have her harden in her touch, relishing the softness of the contact, this short-lived feeling of being a guest instead of a prisoner, relishing the silence instead of dreading it.

Because there seems to be a difference in silence oppressed on you and silence you share in.
Leather thongs can teach you silence even in their absence, once you realize the merit in silence.

Once you feel its healing effect.

Once you share in the silence.

So to realize that you are not alone in your pain.

Not alone in the silence.
Bad Omens

Chapter Summary

Brienne is busy weaving while Jaime is busy watching Brienne weave, only for bad news calling them to the village.

And that even though this should be a happier time for all involved.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, thanks for sticking around and with me and my cutting away at wonderful Norse mythology as I like it. Also much thanks for the comments and the kudos, they are ever the more appreciated, even though I still owe some replies.

I am sorry for the late update/answer times as of late (so much lateness going on), but there was a lot of stuff going on in real life as well as in fandom life (JB Appreciation Week is just around the corner after all!!!), so I didn't get around editing until now.

Anyway, yet again, I am mostly building on stuff I read online for rituals and the like... so blame my sources not me. I am just a Wacky who likes herself some Viking shenanigan.

I hope you are going to enjoy!

Much love! ♥♥♥

“… So, you tell me again. Why am I bound to watch you weave?” Jaime sighs, sitting on the ground, bobbing his knees as he watches Brienne working the weaving loom for what feels like days now.

Only the Gods will know why they put him through all of this here. Jaime has missions to fulfill, has to play a game for the sake of his people. Yet, here he is, watching a mannish woman weave. Here he is, wrapped in chains, unable to escape, unable to get away, even though this is not King’s Landing, is not some great clan with many soldiers and shieldmaidens. Instead, here he is, still, after he was taken captive by a bunch of youths, he, Jaime Lannister, son of Tywin.

The Kingslayer.

Whatever the norns may try to weave into the threads which make up his life, if that is what they do, they surely must have their dear fun watching Jaime squirm while history seems to go on without him. And that after he set so much into stone at the tip of his blade.
Though that is a story no one will ever hear, will never find in the runes. I made sure of it when I shoved a sword through is back and kept my tongue since.

“Because you don’t want to stay in the muddy pen again, as you *loudly* announced just this morning perhaps?” Brienne suggests in a flat voice, unimpressed by his lamentations, *as always*.

“Ah, there was that one detail. I tend to forget it every now and then,” he snorts, rolling his shoulders.

No, he truly doesn’t fancy staying in the bloody, muddy pen for just one more night if he can help it. Jaime’s bones can still feel the ache that comes from the cold and he does not need any more of it, even more so because Jaime has any intention to get out of this place as soon as he can. And for that, he needs his strengths, he is aware, because Brienne has proven plentifully that she has the determination it takes to hold even him back, him, Jaime Lannister of Casterly Rock, him, Jaime Tywinson, him, the Kingslayer.

*But not for much longer. I will see to that, too. I have to.*

“Such bad memory,” Brienne sighs, her eyes trained on the loom as she moves the stick shuttle through the threads in front of her, making it look like a small boat cutting through the waves under her hand.

While Brienne enjoys training with sword and axe most of her time, she always found something strangely calming about the chore of weaving. And that is not only so because it is an old tradition for the women to carry out. Rather, she enjoys the motions, the way the stick shuttle moves and how even someone who does not pride herself being very artistic in her execution like her can create her own patterns.

*It’s like a ship cutting through the open sea, blue like sapphires…*

“No, but I mean… we didn’t go to town in over *two* days. And that is the only time you take the lion *out for a walk,*” Jaime argues, puckering his lips. “So naturally, I wonder how it comes that you won’t even grant me that bit of courtesy.”

“That is because you are not wanted around the town right now,” Brienne tells him, not bothering to look the man in the eye as she speaks.

“Why so?” he asks with a grin. “I thought I was some sort of *spectacle,* as much as the people keep staring at me whenever you drag me after you down the hill. Arguably, I am the most interesting thing your little town’s ever seen.”

Though getting glances is nothing new to Jaime, to tell the truth. In fact, he is more accustomed to people whispering behind his back or sheepishly stealing glances at him than he is to have someone the likes of Brienne right in his face for whatever she sees wrong in him, now reasonably or not.

Which is something Jaime reckons he would give her credit for, if not for the very situation he finds himself in under her watchful, big, blue eyes. A captive does not have to show a captor any respect, after all. That is contrary to the cause of escape – because such action is still considered rather *impolite* by most others.

“That is something I do not have to tell you,” Brienne replies as she keeps threading at a steady rhythm.

That is perhaps one of the things that Jaime learned to find fascinating about this life here at the village. The silence that makes you hear the loud roar of nature again – and the steadiness, which the
wrench seems to embody. The same routines, the same rhythm in her steps, the same times, the same chores, day in, day out.

Even her weaving follows a melody only she seems to know.

“But you could,” Jaime argues with a smile tugging at his lips.

She sighs. “But I won’t.”

Jaime leans his head back with a grunt. “Ugh.”

And that is one of the things he finds far less fascinating about the mannish woman: The stubbornness with which Brienne carries out almost anything, even if it’s only just to defy him.

“That is hardly any news,” Brienne tells him.

Jaime bounces back on his legs a few times as his limbs are on the verge of falling asleep. “… So, is there any chance that I get something red any time soon? Are you weaving for me, is that it, wench? You make me suffer through seeing its production to learn a valuable lesson about how I have to see how things are crafted and don’t just happen to fall off the trees, like the spoiled brat you take me to be?”

“That would be a valuable lesson for you to learn indeed, I believe, but I don’t consider it my duty to teach you lessons that apparently the people who raised you failed to execute,” Brienne says in the sort of tone that Jaime does not like at all.

In fact, it is the kind of tone that makes him grind his teeth to the point that his jaw aches.

“Now you insult my parents? How daring of you,” he snorts, though really, if Brienne weren’t a woman, and if he wasn’t tied up, Jaime would show her how she is not allowed to talk disrespectfully about his family.

Jaime reserves that right for himself.

“I don’t blame them,” Brienne argues. “You seem to be a lost cause anyway.”

“You are always so harsh on me, wench, and that even though I behaved myself so very well as of late!” Jaime croons.

Apparently, jesting with her is one of the few things that Jaime finds himself somewhat appreciating. What else is there to laugh about as a prisoner, after all? He has to keep himself preoccupied with something, anything, if only to bypass going insane, sitting alone in the muddy pen, sitting alone in the room, being alone, being lonely, not having anyone talk to him.

As much as Jaime finds his mind at ease with the silence spreading across the village like the fog hanging heavy over the dew-dipped grass during the morning hours, he loathes being treated with silence, he hates being treated with silence by Brienne in particular, he learned, though Jaime wouldn’t know why.

*Probably the first signs of insanity,* Jaime thinks to himself. *Which reminds me that it is truly time that I bid my farewell and get out of here to return to my people.*

Her routine stops as Brienne turns towards him, her eyes narrow slits, and a faint blush creeping up her freckled cheeks as she puts her hands on either side of her thick hip. “You grabbed my rear just two days ago.”
“Out of reflex!” Jaime insists, batting his eyelashes at her to feign innocence, which only seems to fuel the woman’s anger.

And while the punches she threw at him thereafter had him see stars for a moment here and there, Jaime must admit that her rear is firmer than he anticipated, just going by the looks of it. Though he reckons that this is part of the reason why he was not allowed into the town ever since that little incident that had her blush a very dark shade of red.

And not all came from anger, I am fairly sure.

“You know, normally, you’d have to pay solid coin as means of punishment for such behavior,” she points out to him, lifting her chin slightly, seemingly to make herself even taller than Brienne is by nature, which Jaime finds only the more entertaining.

“And you know that I came without coins ever since I got dragged to your village,” Jaime argues. “How would I pay the debt?”

“Which proves that you are of no use whatsoever for much of anything,” Brienne grumbles, turning back around to start weaving again, seemingly very desperate to maintain her routines to somehow control her blushes and growing discomfort.

Though Jaime won’t let her off the hook that easily, that much is for sure. After all, he has a reputation to live up to.

“I am far more important than this shameful existence you put me in assumes,” he argues.

She cocks an eyebrow at him. “Like slaying kings?”

“Like slaying kings, yes,” Jaime replies forcefully, his tone deepening instantly to the point that Brienne has to blink once, then twice.

She keeps threading silently, though Brienne can’t help but think that the edge in his voice whenever she raises the topic reveals something underneath the easy smile exterior of the man known as the Kingslayer that has her wonder whether it’s actually a raw emotion or just an act. Because if she didn’t know better, if she didn’t know that this man can lie without it showing on his face, Brienne would be inclined to think that there is both pain and pride in his features, a kind of sad sense of justification. However, Brienne tries her best to stay clear of those thoughts.

He is just a prisoner until the althing takes place. Then all will return to normal, Brienne reminds herself as she keeps weaving, trying to find ease at the task. All will be as it was before he came here to cause such mischief. All will be as it once was.

“Why won’t they have me around the village, you tell me? Did I misbehave myself that badly towards them? I tend to focus all of my efforts on you alone,” Jaime goes on after a long moment of silence. He knows that anger is lost on her. She wouldn’t understand anyway. No one understands.

“It’s only for a time,” Brienne tells him, biting her lower lip as she lets the thread slide through her fingers. “After that, you get to bug everyone around town again.”

“That herb lady gives me the evil eye every time she sees me. She almost starts to grow on me for that matter,” Jaime muses, still quite happy about that. The woman rubbed him in the wrong way right from the start.
“That is hardly surprising,” Brienne huffs. To think that Jaime spoke up to her the way he did – it’s something that is oftentimes on her mind these days, despite the fact that Brienne would rather not admit to it. That was the first time that a man other than her father, someone who had no reason or gain from it, spoke up on her behalf. Though Brienne is quite sure that it was no more than an accident, a joke at best, and a scheme at worst. Jaime likely believed that this would buy him her trust. Because he still seems to take her for a foolish jarl’s daughter he can talk into releasing him with a bit of a tease and offering a “kiss and a feel.”

Yet, he should make no mistake. I am not nearly as dumb and easy-believing as he takes me to be, Brienne ponders as her fingers dance over the threads. If only he knew just how distrustful I actually am of the world, then perhaps he’d see that those attempts are more than futile, so he would spare us both the shame.

“Do you care that she is still upset about that?” Jaime asks, ripping Brienne out of her thoughts, and back to him, his green eyes constantly on her. She blinks.

“No really,” Brienne admits, because truth be told, she was getting increasingly frustrated that this woman was mistreating her so. However, Brienne is far too used to be looked at in this way to bother to call people upon it every time it occurs. Now that Jaime did it, however, shed a different light on the matter. It got Brienne thinking that maybe it is not as normal as she makes it out to be. And maybe she has to correct them more often, as he said.

Brienne shakes her head. I will not start thinking he has the rights of it, will I? He is a prisoner and a liar. Frigg may help me. This is madness.

“Good,” Jaime chuckles, almost appreciative for all she can judge. “And where is your father at?”

“Away,” Brienne replies sharply. Jaime shakes his head. The woman seems to take any question of his as a scheme to break out.

Though then again, she may have a point in that… but not on this one! Sometimes I just want to know where people are!

“Yes, I gathered as much. He’s away a lot,” Jaime comments.

Which struck him as odd, honestly. Jaime’s father normally only ever leaves for the althing once a year or some other business that requires his personal presence to deal with other jarls. Otherwise, Tywin is smart enough to send people in his name, so to put himself less at risk of being attacked. A man of power always has to fear to have it stripped away from him, after all. Though perhaps that is it – Jarl Selwyn is not as powerful as his father is, so perchance that is the reason why.

However, there seems to be a general attitude in both the Jarl and his daughter that is about doing things by themselves. While Brienne lives the life of a peasant girl, Jarl Selwyn is busy travelling back and forth to do the work he may otherwise well assign to one of his trusted advisors, some karls, a cousin, a distant relative, someone, anyone.

Though maybe, he doesn’t have someone other than his daughter to truly trust?

“He is our jarl. That means he bears a lot of responsibility,” Brienne tells him, instantly sounding offended. Jaime tries hard not to roll his eyes. While he takes his secret joy in teasing the woman without relent, Jaime finds himself irritated when Brienne sees a slight in every godforsaken word he speaks. As though his entire existence was an insult to the oh so honorable shieldmaiden.

“But why so many outside the village?” Jaime asks.
“He didn’t leave the village,” Brienne tells him. “But other times, he has to talk to other jarls for matters of trade and the like. Father rather goes to them than have them come here.”

Jaime curls his lips into a frown. “Why so?”

“We rather keep to ourselves,” she explains. Jaime narrows his eyes.

*That is hardly even the half of it.*

“He wants to guard your resources,” he argues, which sounds closer to the other half of the truth the woman seems keen on hiding from him.

*As though that is going to work.*

“It’s something we were taught very early on,” Brienne replies, barely moving her lips apart as she speaks.

*What would he know? He is a spoiled son of a spoiled jarl who wouldn’t know what honor is if it kicked him in the head,* Brienne thinks, shaking her head.

*Of course* they have to guard their resources, *of course* they have to guard themselves. The last time they didn’t, they lost everything. The last time they let their defenses down, opened the gates, those doors were trampled down and burned to ash.

But how is someone the likes of Jaime Lannister supposed to even comprehend that loss? To comprehend that need to keep things as they are?

How is he to understand a world he is no part of?

How is he supposed to understand their personal Ragnarök when he has never seen his own world collapse the way they have?

How would he understand annihilation when he likely only ever lived in plenty, in times of reconstruction?

“So if he isn’t outside the town, but inside it, how comes he is not here?” Jaime questions, ripping Brienne out of her thoughts back to the weaving loom.

“How is he in the woods,” she tells him matter-of-factly.

“What would he want *there*?” Jaime questions, wrinkling his nose. He long since accepted that this village is rather strange, and that its people seem even stranger, but at some point even he can’t seem to keep track on what those folks are up to.

“That is none of your concern,” Brienne hisses.

Jaime turns his head back. If he only ever bothered to be interested in what people believe may be of his personal interest, he would never learn any new information. And how boring would *that* be?

“But it *is* of my interest because what else would I worry about if not whatever small thing changes around here? It’s rare enough that something happens in this village. And it’s not like it’s impossible for me to figure it out, given some time. The lads seem to trust me well enough by now, ever since I told that one boy that I could tell him about the treasures of King’s Landing,” Jaime argues.

Brienne narrows her eyes at him, stepping away from the weaving loom, hands on her hips, her face a tight grimace promising no good.
“You shouldn’t put such foolish ideas inside their minds. They are spoiled enough even without your effort,” Brienne retorts, her eyes narrow slits at this point.

That man truly doesn’t know anything when it comes to the important matters. Brienne has her dear trouble with the youths already. Their minds are filled with ideas about raids and that the only way of gaining renown is pillage and conquest. There is still by far too much bad blood flowing in their veins, carrying from the old generation over to the next, even though her father and she do their best to let that bad blood flow out of them at last, let it dry on sand so it can be taken away by the winds.

Because those young men simply don’t know better.

Because they were either too small to remember or were not yet born by the time their people were chased out of their home, to here. The youths don’t know yet that the karls calling for war, calling for revenge and raids are speaking out of a deeply felt remorse born out of loss, even though a lot sung a different tune to join Brienne’s father’s music back in the day.

The youths only ever hear about the elders’ disappointment that their Jarl handles things in a certain way, that he won’t allow for pillage, that he won’t allow for a conquest across the Narrow Sea to chase the shadow that looms above them ever since the day their old world ended.

They only ever hear from other young men who already had their raids, earned their golden arm bands, who already pillaged and won respect of their clan through death and sacking towns and cities alike.

They only hear the glorious songs sung on the ships as they cut through the water.

However, they do not hear the sad lament of a father’s cry as news reach him that his oldest son was taken by the waves, was swallowed by the sea to never be found again.

They do not hear the mother’s cries of desperation as her husband cooked in endless green, whereas her youngest is all but a lifeless bundle in her arms that she cannot let go of, even though that life, too, was lost to the flames.

They do not hear the moaning and groaning, the sighs and the weeping, of dozens of men, women, and children as they set sail from one village to the next in the vain hope of finding a place to stay, a place to be, only to be turned down, chased away, until they built their own world where no one comes looking for them.

They only hear stories of stories. Echoes of echoes. They only hear one side, but not the other. They only have longings awakened within them about a place that doesn’t exist, about a state of being that the elders should keep them from instead of dragging them there, if only they weren’t so set on their old traditions.

So no, Brienne doesn’t need Jaime to pour oil into a flame her father and she are trying so desperately to douse.

Just why does everyone want to see a world burn?

_It only ever leaves ashes behind. And what is meant to grow on that?_

“What? That is what our people do. We travel to other towns and lands, and if we can’t have trade, we raid,” Jaime argues, confirming just what Brienne was thinking about. “It’s our way of living.”

_That man is like all the others, he just doesn’t want to admit it to himself; Brienne ponders with a grimace. Because while he may want to believe that there are no men like him, he is like most other_
“That doesn’t mean we cannot try to get that out of their mind. So don’t raise their appetite for something we hope to prevent from becoming their diet,” Brienne says, blinking once, then twice.

Why is the world so hungry for war? she wonders. When war is the one force that can take all food needed for life away?

“You truly are a curious case of a shieldmaiden, wench. You want to fight, you want to raise shield and axe in battle, but at the same time, you want nothing of it and live a peasant’s life. How does that fit together, you tell me?” Jaime questions.

“I value peace. I do not cherish war. I fight because I want to protect the people I love. I like to fight so long I fight for the protection of those who cannot protect themselves. I don’t need raids, I don’t need more treasures for myself than what I have. If I had hunger for power, for titles or gold, I wouldn’t live a peasant’s life, would I?” Brienne answers.

Jaime blinks once, then twice, and then another time again.

Apparently, not all shieldmaids are out for blood.

“You would not, no,” he is bound to agree.

And here Jaime thought that he was the only one who believed wars to have a stale aftertaste.

“So you tell me, why is it so outrageous that I do not seek war, even though I enjoy a good fight?” Brienne asks, wetting her lips with her tongue.

“Because that is quite unique in this world. We are all too idly focused on gaining renown and riches to present to the Allfather once we come to pass to bother about peace and sustainability in the here and now,” Jaime says, leaning his head back with a sigh.

“So… you are not fond of war,” Brienne says, though she intends it as a question, no doubt.

“Far from it. I think it’s an overrated system,” Jaime replies. “Too many losers, too few winners. Because, let’s be honest, even if only just a single jarl wins, what use does he have of the victory if he has no one left to take care of his lands?”

“So perhaps I am not at all that unique in this world if you share the sentiment,” Brienne replies with a hint of a smile tugging at her lips.

“Perhaps not,” Jaime chuckles. “See, maybe that is the big hint the Gods mean to give us: Us two should band together, huh? Trying to stop war entirely. Think about it. Bringers of the peace no one asked for.”

“You think I would ever side with you?” she snorts.

“Well, if you do, you maybe have a faint chance of winning. Without me, you are lost, wench. Face it,” Jaime says with a grin.

“I tend to fight my battles on my own, so I do not need you to fight those battles for me, Kingslayer,” Brienne tells him with a small smile. “Thank you, but no thank you.”

“And how long will you keep fighting me on refusing to tell me what is going on in the village that is so very secretive that you will not share that oh so vital information with your prisoner? As though I
could do anything with that knowledge,” he huffs, changing back to the topic he would like to learn more about as well.

Though Jaime must say, it is a curious thing, to find a kindred spirit in an enemy.

After all, you are supposed to stand on opposite sides on everything, right?

“You’ve given me any reason to believe that whatever I say to you is what you mean to make a weapon out of to stab me in the back with it,” Brienne argues.

She has not forgotten about the happenings by the well by any means, or by the pit, for that matter. Brienne knows better than to trust an enemy. She knows better than to trust the Kingslayer. Or a man not her father in general.

Even if he may share some of my sentiments, or at the least pretend well enough to do so.

“You are far too unimportant to stab in the back, I am afraid. Trust me in this, wench: Once I kill you, I will watch the life fade from your big blue eyes. I only kill those from behind who do not deserve the honor of a good, clean death, and who are far too important to leave alive by any chance,” Jaime tells her.

I only stab kings in the back when they are out to burning things – and people.

“Oh, so you consider leaving me alive only just because you consider me that utterly unimportant, I see,” she huffs.

“You should consider it a fortune, wench. You are not interesting enough for me to kill. If you were, you wouldn’t be alive anymore,” Jaime replies.

“Well, you may have the rights of it,” Brienne says with a feigned smile. “Thus, I shall cherish my unimportance that has prevented you for so long now from killing me. One should think that you value your life so much more than mine. So it’d seem curious to me that you have not killed me yet despite that fact.”

Jaime grins. “If that was an attempt of taunting me, it was a poor one.”

“You are too unimportant to taunt, let alone insult,” Brienne retorts.

“Oh, so now we are talking!” he howls with laughter. “Well, if I am that unimportant to you in turn, then why don’t we share in the spirit and you tell me just what is going on in the village? If you are that certain in your success of keeping me? What harm is done in telling me, huh?”

Brienne shakes her head. “Will you leave this alone?”

“Not in a thousand years.”

“By then you are dead.”

“Not according to my father. Our empire is supposed to last that long, if not longer,” Jaime chuckles. “But the point is that I won’t stop asking – unless you tell me. So… it’s up to you.”

Brienne lets out a long sigh. “… A wedding is to take place.”

“And that is so important that you have to withhold that knowledge from me for so long why?” Jaime asks with a frown. He hoped for something more mysterious than that, something more exciting, more useful.
“One can never know what people use to make weapons with,” Brienne argues. And she has yet to figure from what materials Jaime can make weapons.

“I wouldn’t make marriage a weapon. This is such a holy union that even I, the Kingslayer, would not dare disrupt it. What are you thinking of me?” Jaime laughs.

“Nothing good,” she grumbles.

He wrinkles is nose. “I assumed as much.”

“In any case, it’s a wedding. Thus, as the old rules have it, the woman and the man are separated for their initiation rituals before they are married before the Gods,” Brienne declares in a monotonous voice.

“Well, that would explain your father’s absence. To hammer some sense into the youths that are so very spoiled in the hope that some will carry over into the holy union of marriage,” Jaime laughs.

“He is not with them,” Brienne replies, much to Jaime’s irritation, which he expresses instantly, “If so, I must excuse myself for addressing your mother wrongly all this time.”

Brienne shakes her head with a sigh, but then adds in a smaller voice, “My father is there tonight to perform the ritual of blessing that a father would normally do for his daughter.”

“… So her father died,” Jaime concludes, somewhat sobered up at once.

Here he was hoping for some joyous story about Jarl Selwyn simply enjoying to take part in those rituals rather than watching the young men make fools of themselves getting drunk on the mead.

“Yes, and she has no living relatives. My father considers it his duty and privilege to thus hand her over. It’s what we established here. Normally, Maggy would be up there with them, but she has not been feeling at all too well these past few days, so she gave the blessings to the future bride before she went off with the others for the other rituals. My father fills into those functions if need be, at least for tonight,” Brienne explains.

“Which raises all but one question,” Jaime says.

“Which would be?” she asks.

“How comes you are not assigned to the task? As the Jarl’s daughter? I do understand that he is to give the father’s blessings, but you could well handle the rituals otherwise ascribed to women,” Jaime explains. “You are at least far better suited for that matter than your father, no?”

“Well, you tell me, do you think it would be considered a fortune for a bride to have the Kingslayer on a leash sitting by as I make sacrifices to the Gods?” Brienne retorts.

Jaime laughs at that, tilting his head to the side. “No, you don’t drag an oathbreaker to seal an oath of a holy union such as marriage, I do understand that bit, but why not leave me with your father instead?”

“That is none of your concern yet again,” Brienne hisses.

“Oh, we are all on our own in this world, I know. What else is there for me to do but ask questions to somehow have a feeling of not being alone? Particularly because you will not give me a kiss and a
feel to be a little less lonely as I lie there, tied up like a bundle at night,” Jaime teases, rewarding Brienne with a dirty look that has her scowl at him in turn, as always.

“Most women do not wish for me to attend such rituals, and I respect that, let’s leave it at that,” Brienne answers, moving the stick shuttle at fast pace now. Jaime can hear the strings sighing and shrieking under her almost erratic movements.

“You are the Jarl’s daughter. Why should you care?” Jaime argues.

*How does Father always say? The lion does not concern himself with the opinion of the sheep.*

Brienne rolls her broad shoulders as she keeps weaving, as though she was trying to catapult herself into the future, acting like one of the norns, or trying to, at least. “They ask me not to come, so why should I care to go?”

“You could go anyway,” Jaime huffs. “As the Jarl’s daughter, I can only repeat.”

If the men told him to keep away from sitting by their campfires, Jaime would kick their asses in the training arenas on the very next day to make sure that they understand that while they get to call him Kingslayer, they will not chase him out of his own home, out of his place.

“I am… a marital bad omen as far as the Gods seem concerned,” Brienne says, licking her lips, which only brings Jaime to frown ever the more. “Now, that you have to explain to me.”

Brienne lets out a long sigh, instantly regretting for even having brought it up. She knows she said by far too much already at this point of time. Just why does Jaime make her let those truths slip out of her mouth when she normally does so well to keep them sealed behind pursed lips? Brienne was fine keeping her world, her thoughts, to herself, but Jaime keeps dragging them out of her, yanks them out to expose them to the light of day. He makes her voice things Brienne is used to cloaking in silence, and the young woman is afraid that the words that will fly out of her mouth won’t rise into the sky, but crash to the ground because Jaime will keep shooting down whatever bird may leave her mouth.

He will leave all but broken wings behind, she is sure.

Just what is it in him that makes her speak?

“Well, as is custom, I was brought along to such wedding preparations once I was old enough to attend,” Brienne explains before she can even tell herself no. “The first time I came with, we all prayed to the Gods. We prayed very long until we were in a trance, more or less. I had a dream that night, which foretold great grievance to rest upon this marital union. I didn’t want to say at first, but they told me to speak up anyway… because if the norns foretell it… you are bound to listen to their call.”

“Well, and that got you excluded how?” Jaime asks, furrowing his eyebrows.

“I was right. When we returned, we found the future husband with thrall girls who didn’t attend the ritual because they did not wish to attend… quite busy in the hay,” Brienne explains.

To this day, she can remember the women shrieking, and then no longer happy bride beating the living hell out of the man. The only one who seemed amused was Maggy, who cheered the bride on to hit him even harder.

“Well, that surely caused some grief, but that may have been a good guess on your behalf all the same,” Jaime argues. “For that, the women shouldn’t have taken you as the bad omen. If anything,
she should have blamed her stupid husband for being unable to keep it in his breeches.”

“If it happens three times in a row, you can assume it to be a sign,” Brienne argues.

“Oh maybe the men here are just too whorish,” Jaime chuckles.

“The next one drowned a short while after the couple took their vows, and I saw him swallow water in my dream. Another left the village to chase renown in raids instead of walking the path my Father’s cleared for them instead. I dreamed of him grabbing his coat and sailing away. He left his newly wedded wife with a child in the belly and no fortune to fetch from,” Brienne replies, her eyes fixed on the woven fabric in front of her. “So I don’t think it can only be applied to some man’s inability to value the old vows.”

“And you saw all that before it happened,” Jaime says, though really, it is a question.

He heard of people having prophetic dreams. And that Maggy seems to be capable of magic that Jaime does not account the seer back at Casterly Rock to inherit by any means. However, Brienne doesn’t seem like the type. She is faithful to the Gods, true enough, but Jaime tended to think that seers were made of a different kind of stuff than the likes of Brienne. Though that has Jaime wonder ever the more about this mannish woman standing by the weaving loom. For a shieldmaiden pretending to be a peasant girl, Brienne seems to have something about her that should make her think less of the sheep. And yet, she decides to follow the flock.

“Not in that detail, but… well, the women started to suspect that my presence was somehow a bad omen for their marriages turning to grief. They have asked me to stay away from the wedding preparations henceforth,” Brienne explains. “Henceforth… no more visions.”

Maggy was furious back when the first future bride asked Brienne to stay away. The seer was that close to hitting the woman with her cane, but Brienne stopped Maggy before she could. She told the older woman that she didn’t have to come along, in fact, didn’t even mind. Thus, unless the women wished for her presence, Brienne would not show up out of principle ever since the three times where she did.

In fact, a part of Brienne welcomed not having the women’s eyes shift to her when she came along, expecting her to dream something that would come about in some way. Another part cherished the silence it came with. She has enough bad dreams haunting her late at night, wherein blue waters turn an angry shade of green. Brienne has no need for dreaming of the grief of others. In fact, she would rather not have those dreams ever again if only she could help it. Maggy keeps telling her that it is a gift and that Brienne would do best seeing it as such, but on that matter, Brienne would much rather remain blind – and leave it to the likes of Maggy to make sense of the darkness that lies in the future ahead of them.

She doesn’t have to take part in those rituals to be her father’s daughter. And if his vision of her future is meant to become reality, then perhaps the Kingslayer has a point when he says that she should care less about what the others may think of her.

What does it matter anyway? They don’t need my blessing and I don’t need theirs. I will only ever need it for when I bring myself to give my own blessings to my future husband, so I may carry on my father’s teachings through him and with him… if only the man most likely to become such were not such a dull oaf.

“So you keep away from other rituals, too?” Jaime questions.

“No, just those in particular,” Brienne replies. “They wouldn’t get me to stay away from executing
my faith as anyone does here. Furthermore, they think that since I am still unwed for so long now is a misfortune in itself they would not want to bring along to the rituals. Bad omens seem to surround me, and most women tend to believe that misfortune is best avoided by keeping me from those places.”

Jaime shakes his head. “Good grief, your people are stupid.”

“They believe in the old tales and old rituals. It is one of the few things that remain over time,” Brienne tells him, rolling her broad shoulders. “No harm is done to me if I attend or not. I can well do without the ritual bathings and such.”

“Wait, you bathe there?” Jaime asks, seemingly having found new interest in the topic. Brienne frowns at him. “You don’t?”

“Truth be told, I never attended the women’s preparations for a wedding,” Jaime jokes. “I know, shocking.”

“What of your sister? She’s never spoken of it to you?” Brienne asks.

“I was not present for when she married Robert Baratheon. She was at King’s Landing, I was sent back to the Rock upon my father’s order,” Jaime replies.

And that was likely for the best, he thinks to himself and only to himself. Or else things could have gone further than they did anyway.

And he was in such a dark place anyway that Jaime does not want to find out what could have been if they had been in the same place at the same time. As odd as it may seem, it was likely for the best that he hid away at the Rock for a time, licked his wounds in silence, in his own darkness, getting used to his new name, his future and grief.

“In any case, I don’t miss being there. It only ever caused me grief to be amongst women who don’t like me or joke about me when they think I don’t know it. I suppose it will be different for when my shieldmaidens come of age and want to wed. Some of them likely do not believe in those myths as much, though perhaps…” Brienne says, but then stops herself for a moment, the stick shuttle unmoving in her hand, “… there is some truth to them after all.”

How else would one explain that she has not found a suitable match in how long now? That her best chance is the dull oaf of a man her father would want her to reconsider for the sole sake of his weakness? Brienne knows that she is not pretty to look at, but she also knows that she is a jarl’s daughter.

And now I am most likely to wed Hyle Hunt the Cunt, she thinks to herself, finding her breath hitching along with her anger. I seem to be a bad omen indeed, even to my own future marriage, my own future life. And that even though my dream was another. But on that account, it seems to be no vision but just wishful thinking.

“I tend to think that people, far too often, blame the Gods for their own misdoings. To blame are either the men who cheated on their wives, who left them in chase of glory and renown, or the sea itself for taking one of your men before his time,” Jaime comments.

If the Gods are true and if the Gods are just – then why is the world so full of injustice?

“Well, that is why I normally enjoy an evening just by myself on those rare occasions,” Brienne sighs.
At least that is the upside she found in it all beside the lack of dark dreams to haunt her. It’s quiet and peaceful around here when all are busy in the towns or the woods to prepare for the wedding. She has the house to herself.

She can breathe in home.

She can simply be.

“And yet, what you decide to do is… work,” Jaime argues, nodding at the weaving loom. “Way to spend your evening free of responsibilities, wench. You truly don’t seem to know what it’s like to simply enjoy yourself, do you?”

“Duty before pleasure,” Brienne replies, rolling her shoulders.

A ridiculous grin spreads across Jaime’s face, as though he was a cat. “But what of pleasure while fulfilling duty? Hm? It’d be so easy. Lift your skirts and lean over the weaving loom – and I would dutifully pleasure you.”

“In exchange for release of your constraints, I’d assume,” Brienne huffs.

“Only after giving you yours, obviously,” Jaime says with his typical sort of wicked grin that has Brienne’s skin crawl.

“Then I rather stick to the constraints of duty,” she snorts, though Jaime can see that delicious sort of blush back on her freckled cheeks.

“That is because you haven’t yet gotten a taste of the pleasure I could provide,” Jaime argues, cocking an eyebrow at her, easing out his legs.

“For that I am so ugly and for that you want me so very dead, you are curiously focused on getting me under the furs, or how am I to understand your constant talking about it, Kingslayer?” Brienne argues, which does surprise him.

She gets better at this game after all – because she starts to understand to take it as such: a game. Good.

“I just follow my family’s principle: A Lannister always pays his debts. Thus, if you were to undo my chains, I would have to repay you for the deed. Right now, I have no gold on me, no silver, no sword. Just myself. So, in that sense, offering you bodily pleasure is one of the few things I can offer for matters of bargain – because that is something I can give you for certain. I don’t need anything but myself to pay that debt, and pay it back with interest,” Jaime tells her with a smile.

Brienne huffs at him with a light shake of her head. “That still presumes that I would take the bargain, in exchange for what? Some dancing of the fingers?”

“Oh, as always, you do me no justice, wench,” Jaime chuckles, enjoying the thrill of the game. “I would do much more than let my fingers dance over those tender, sweet, soaking spots I am sure are aching for touch in a long, long time. It could be whatever you’d like it to be, I can only repeat that. My fingers, my palm, my cock… whatever you’d want me to use to repay you good and proper in exchange for my freedom.”

Brienne turns to him slightly, the stick shuttle tightly clutched between her long fingers. She narrows her eyes at him, but then turns back to the weaving loom, as though it allowed her to escape the reality that the blush on her cheeks starts to rain down the thick columns of her neck.
If not far further down, Jaime thinks to himself, curiously intrigued by the thought.

“My father always says that it is a kind of madness to try to cut wood with a blunt knife over and over, hoping that it will miraculously work after all,” Brienne says, her gaze stubbornly away from him. “So, you tell me, isn’t it a kind of madness on your behalf to try over and over to bait me with such, let’s say, offer, expecting a different result each time?”

Jaime narrows his eyes at her in turn, suddenly feeling something hot rise in the pit of his stomach, bringing back flashes of light to his eyes, all of which are colored green, taking his mind off of any curious blushes, back to the smell of burning flesh and a madman’s laughter echoing down the hallways of the Red Keep.

“You have never met madness before, wench, so you’d do better not to generalize,” he hisses, trying to stuff the burning hot memories back behind the walls he built around it over the years. "I know what madness is, I’ve looked it right in the eye, and it burns down flesh and bone until nothing remains but ashes and misery. Everything else… just a fallacy of the mind. You shouldn’t use that word so easily.”

Aerys was mad, and Jaime won’t allow someone to say that he is like him. He killed that man when no one else would. He killed the man no matter the price that was for him to pay. He battled madness of a whole nation that turned away its eyes from the truth right out there, long before green seeped through the Red Keep.

Was it madness on Jaime’s behalf to throw all of his fortune away? To throw his honor away, his sense of duty? Perhaps, but it is by no means the kind of madness that had a man howling with his last living breath to “burn them all!”

“I have looked madness in the eye myself, make no mistake, Kingslayer,” Brienne says, now looking him right in the eye, her gaze ablaze, a storm rising over the sapphire sea, waves collapsing behind the blue orbs piercing right through him, sharper than any knife’s blade.

Jaime blows out air through his nostrils. He has no clue what she’d mean with that, but there is no way of denying that Brienne is too honest to lie about the matter. And when he looks at her right now, Jaime sees himself, his own anguish and anger that comes from seeing madness destroy and annihilate the world you once knew and called your own.

He licks his lips. “… Seemingly, we share in a lot of things after all.”

Some fights are better left unfought – or delayed until it is the right occasion.

“If that is what you want to believe,” Brienne replies in a small voice, turning her attention back to the weaving loom, seemingly now offended.

Jaime opens his mouth for a retort, but he doesn’t get to it because his voice is deafened by the sound of a loud bell.

“What is that about?” he asks, looking around, startled.

Brienne stares at the door, her eyes widening. The stick shuttle falls to the ground with a thud.

Bad omens indeed, even if I am not taking part in the rituals, Brienne thinks to herself as she finds her heart beating faster, beating harder, the unsteady ba-thump drumming in her skull.

“Wench?” Jaime asks her more urgently this time, trying to get Brienne to tell him something, but she just walks up to where he is tied up wordlessly, bends down, and starts to untie the knots holding
him in place.

And while her eyes are racing, Brienne’s movements are as steady as ever.

“Come, we must go to the village,” Brienne orders once the knots are undone, giving the leash a sharp tug. “Now.”

“But why?” Jaime questions, standing up.

*What is all this about?*

“There is trouble in the village, that is why,” Brienne says, her attention already going for the door, the outside, the town below, her home, her people.

“What kind of trouble?” he asks.

“We are about to find out.”

They make for the outside, Brienne whistles once. She doesn’t have to look around to know that Sun is doing as he is supposed to, patrolling the woods in her stead. She sent Moon with her father, to help him with his bad leg, and then keep watch outside the holy grounds.

The two then hurry down the mount to the village below, their legs brushing past moist blades of grass, which make hissing sounds at the contact, singing unknown songs of foreboding, which bring Brienne’s skin to crawl with every step she takes closer to the village, all the while reminded of the wedding ceremonies she went to, and how the things she saw turned out true in some many ways, and how the women went to town to prove her visions wrong, only for them to do the exact opposite.

Once they get to town, they find themselves instantly caught up in an uproar raging through the village, cutting through it like a burning poker of iron, caught up in a web of voices, a conglomerate of shouts, shuffling feet across dust and gravel, moans, and screams.

For a moment, Jaime is right back in King’s Landing, back when Aerys started to burn the first people and had them all stand by as fat and skin turned liquid, like wax from the candles burning on the chandeliers, until bones cracked open and melted, bled out, to the point that nothing but a heap that once was a human remained on the marble floor of the Red Keep.

Jaime steals a glance over at Brienne, whose eyes reflect a similar tale from the past, for all it seems, a story told in the same solemn voice, because her gaze seems distant for a moment, too, as though she was somewhere entirely else right at this moment.

Brienne swallows as she stops in her tracks, the faintest of shudders running right through her. This is not just a bad omen, she knows. For a moment, the fear of what is to come paralyzes her, keeps her feet still. Because all she sees is green in the distance, and it’s not the calming green of the grass, of life, but that of fire and death.

She sucks in a deep breath. Brienne knows she cannot allow her fears to keep her still, to keep her from moving. She has a mission, a duty – her people. That is when her gaze snaps back to the here and now. Brienne picks up speed as she pulls Jaime closer to the source of the noises and voices cutting through the narrow alleyways of the town, past longhouses and pebbles on the ground.

Once she spots a young lad walking down one of the alleyways, one of those who brought him to the mud outside the house, halfway staggering, halfway walking over to them, or roughly in the same direction, Brienne calls out to him, “Vidar!”
The young man stops, taking a moment or two until he recognizes her. He shuffles over to her, his feet barely leaving the ground, blinking at the tall woman now before him, which still manages to amuse Jaime somewhat, despite the grave situation seemingly yet to unfold before their eyes.

“What happened?” Brienne demands to know, her gaze flickering back between him and what is going on around them, trying to make sense of both.

“I, I don’t… I know… no…,” he stammers, his gaze remaining unfocused. Brienne grabs his chin roughly to pull him closer, taking a good look at him. “Now don’t tell me you took mushrooms and mead.”

She knows that the men like to get drunk during those initiation rituals, but her father told them again and again not to take the bloody mushrooms. They make them stupid in the head – and careless.

“We all did! The elders said…,” Vidar stammers, but Brienne is having none of it. “I don’t care for what the elders said! You must be out of your mind to all get drunk at one point of time!”

“It’s a wedding!” he insists, his mouth lax from drunkenness – and stupidity.

“And see what it is right now! Is that a wedding to you?” she retorts, gesturing around with the hand with which she holds the leash, accidentally giving Jaime a shove.

Well, he wants to believe that it was only just by accident.

That’s better for the ego.

“Useless,” Brienne hisses as she pushes Vidar away by the chin, almost bringing the lad to fall over. The boy staggers for a few steps, but then catches himself.

“Now show me to where all have gathered and tell me what happened,” she orders, and if not for the severity of the situation, Jaime would like to compliment Brienne on finally acting more like a Jarl’s daughter, but he knows that now is not the occasion.

She gives Vidar a shove and pushes him forward, who goes on to stammer as he staggers, “We were drinking to Iver’s wedding, when suddenly there was… uhm… shouting. We’ve gone to the jetty. Our men came back.”

Jaime steals a glance at Brienne, who looks ever the more distraught with eyes wide and mouth lax. He didn’t know that men were sent out. She seems to be better at keeping things from him than he gave her credit for it at first.

They reach the jetty, and that is when Jaime and Brienne see just why the return of some of their warriors causes such an uproar that has the whole village holding its breath: Two small boats hobble back and forth in the tide, whereas men, staggering and shouting, drag other men out of the boats, leaving bloody trails on the dark wood, marking their paths with their pain, their cries carrying high above the night’s sky, above the clouds, right to the moon to paint it a faint shade of crimson.

“What happened?” Brienne asks as she hurries over to the group to help pull one of the injured men out of the boat swinging up and down in the water. Once they have him, they lower the man down on the jetty, his mouth opening and closing as though he was a fish out of water.

Brienne kneels down beside him, pressing the flat of her palm against his cheek, their skins connected by the blood now covering her hand and his entire body.

“What happened to you?” she questions again, searching the man’s eyes, and finding them, holding
them with her own, trying her best to see the present before her eyes, and not the past or future.

“They, they attacked… us… out of… out of… nowhere… We were… we tried to…,” the man stammers between ragged breaths, speckles of blood tainting his pale, blueish lips with the kind of war paint Brienne would like to never see again.

“Who attacked you?” she asks, pressing the flat of her palm a bit more firmly against his face, as though that could keep the life from flooding out of him, to hold him there, with her, with them.

“We… we… didn’t know the, them… They just… they came… W, we managed to… to… overpower them, but… but…,” he mutters, only to cry out in pain as he moves one of his injured limbs. “Ahhhh.”

Brienne stares at the man’s arm, which is stripped off most of the skin. She looks at it for a long moment.

This was supposed to be a peaceful night.

This was supposed to be peace.

Yet, war reaches them wherever they go.

There is no way of escaping it, no matter how far they go, no matter how secluded thy live. They won’t ever escape this.

Ever.

“That is what Boltons do with their enemies,” Jaime says, his lips barely moving apart as he speaks.

“But what would the Boltons do in the Vale? What would they want with us?” Brienne argues, assessing the man’s injuries, her hands far steadier than her mind is. She has to try her best not to let weakness get the better of her now. Brienne cannot afford it. Her people need her, despite the fact that she sees flashes of the past evading the present, reminding her of endless green, shouts, screams, and people turning to what was swept away by the storm, while never taking the screams with it.

“One can never know, but that is what they do with their enemies. I have seen it before,” Jaime argues as the smell of fresh blood evades his nose, creeping all the way to the top of his head. And here Jaime thought he found a secret refuge wherein small peace was possible – except for his disruption of it every now and then.

Brienne swallows thickly, before snapping her head around to the youths that gathered by the jetty, looking like lost chicks waiting for the mother hen to show the way. “Vidar, Halvar, fetch the women, the healers! Whoever you can get! We need everyone to help!”

“But they are all up the hill with the other women,” Halvar argues.

Brienne blinks, licking her lips.

This is bad.

Why on the days before the wedding? Why now of all times?

She shakes her head. “… So who of the women is in the village right now?”

I should have checked. I should have…
“You, Maggy, and Sassa, I think… I saw them earlier,” Vidar replies uncertainly.

“Alright, five of you get the women from the ritual site! We need every hand here! The rest of you, spread out to check on our borders. Sun is already roaming around there, so that you know. I don’t care if you stumble, I don’t care if you fall. Get back up and keep going. Our home is in danger! And it’s us who have to defend it!” Brienne calls out.

The men disperse, mostly staggering, though definitely driven by fear and urgency.

Brienne turns to the other men who are still busy trying to stop blood from staining the jetty and keeping the lives in the warriors just returned.

“Everyone! We’re moving the men over to Maggy’s! Bandage heavily bleeding wounds and then go!” she shouts, before focusing her attention back on the man she kneels next to. “Take him now.”

The other men help the warrior stand under much screaming and crying in agony, which cuts even deeper than the uproar cut through the village before. Brienne looks at her hand for a moment, which is sticky with the drying blood of the man now getting carried away. She finds her breath hitch, but then reminds herself that she must not allow weakness to show. Instead, Brienne balls her fists and sees to it that the remaining wounded soldiers are moved up to Maggy’s the same way.

She is glad for it that Jaime seemingly decides to keep silent, either out of sympathy or out of understanding that now is not the time for jests. He walks after her wordlessly as they move to the back of the jetty where the last man is getting bandaged.

“Stop that!” she shouts once she realizes how they do it all wrong. Brienne kneels down beside them. “Not like that! If you go that easy, he’ll bleed out before you get him to the end of the jetty.”

She takes a hold of the already blood-soaked bandages and pulls as tight as she can. “Like that. Alright… uhm, we will need mead to boil it for the wounds. Can you gather it? As much as you can carry.”

The men nod in agreement and head out. Brienne focuses her attention back on the wounded soldier. “Now we will bring you to Maggy. She’s going to help you for sure.”

Brienne wraps his uninjured arm around her shoulder as gently as she can. He leans heavily against her, and at the dead weight against her, Brienne finds herself shudder for a moment, reminding her of the well and how Jaime almost had her killed for that moment of distraction. Now would be a perfect opportunity for the Kingslayer to do it. He could just take the leash and strangle them both, toss them into the water, and catch one of the boats to set sail back to Casterly Rock.

Why would he hesitate?

Why would he care?

I should have seen that coming. I should have…

Brienne already wants to yell at one of the men to come back, but that is when she can feel some of the weight being lifted off her shoulder. Brienne turns her head to see Jaime, who hooked the injured man’s arm over his shoulder now, too.

But why would he…?

“What now? You gave the orders. To the healer, aye? Or else, that man will die before he’s seen such,” Jaime grunts, already motioning forward. Brienne blinks, caught off-guard, but then nods her
head and starts walking. She cannot even begin to make sense of the emotions and thoughts flooding he mind, but Brienne doesn’t allow it to show, doesn’t let it hit the light of the torches leading them towards Maggy’s longhouse.

*Now is not the time.*

“Why are you helping us?” Brienne asks anyway, because that question burns down her throat.

“I may have shit for honor, but even I see dishonor in trying to slip away if that means a man’s death who’s fought as bravely as he could, defending his home,” Jaime replies, not looking at her as they carry on.

*Needless to mention that it would have been too troublesome to get out of the village now that everyone is alert, Jaime thinks to himself. There is time and occasion for everything after all.*

“… Thank you,” she says quietly. Jaime nods curtly as they walk the rest of the way. The fuss has them back at once as they reach Maggy’s longhouse, where the seer is busy shouting out orders.

“… Bring them all inside! Inside, I say!” Maggy yells, looking at the men gathering outside. “Who of you drank? All of you, right? You witless fools! I can smell the mushrooms and mead all the way up to here.”

“Maggy!” Brienne calls out as they motion closer.

“Oh, thank Frigg that they sent you at last! One person with sense! Come here, child! I need your hands and eyes… all of you, to be exact!”

“SASSA!” Maggy then shrieks. The young brunette stops in her tracks, blinking repeatedly as she motions closer. “Are you drunk?”

“No.”

“Do you have two hands? If so, we are in dire need of them,” Maggy says.

“But…,” the young woman babbles, but the seer isn’t having it.

“Child, now!” Maggy demands, before turning back to the other men. “Now to you! You will stay outside while we will tend to the men. Keep ready, sober up, and whenever we call, you answer and get us what we need. Is that understood?”

“Aye!” the men shout.

They make their way into the house, where the men are scattered on the ground like red, fallen leaves, as though their season long since came. Brienne and Jaime lower the man they helped over down where there is space left for him.

They straighten back up.

“You will sit in the corner,” Brienne orders. “If you try to escape, there are a good dozen of men out the door ready to tackle you down. While I grant you, they may be a bit drunk, they still have reflexes and one will manage.”

“I am not going anywhere,” Jaime tells her, surprising himself with how much he means that, actually.

“… Good,” she says slowly, but then turns to Maggy. “What do you want me to do?”
“You will be my eyes,” Maggy replies. “You have to tell me what you see, and I will tell you what to do.”

“Alright,” Brienne says, motioning over to the basin to wash her hands. What follows thereafter is more of a rush for her. Kneeling down, muttering some words of sympathy and comfort as they are bound to cause the men more pain. Brienne is used to helping bandage wounds. She has done it so many times for herself and her father, the shieldmaiden and the youths, and on the passage to their new home, sitting on boats swinging in the tide, but this is different. All of this is different. All of this is different.

And it is wrong.

Soon, the smell of blood has evaded her senses, the sight of it, the texture of it as it dries on her hands, her arms, her face.

“We have to stop that bleeding at once. We have to scourge the wound,” Maggy says, ripping Brienne out of her thoughts and back to the man writhing beneath them.

“Sassa!” Brienne calls out to the girl, who mostly stood pressed against the wall, watching on rather than making herself useful. And normally, Brienne would love to tell her to just go and spare herself the sight, but she can’t do it all alone with Maggy.

I am not enough.

“Sassa, take that iron poker and put it in the fire!” the blonde demands. The young woman stands there, perfectly still.

“Sassa! Now! We don’t have the time!” Brienne orders another time.

“But, but…,” Sassa stammers, but Brienne cannot wait for her to gather herself, so she yells, “Sassa, now!”

The young brunet jumps to the task at once, though one can see how much she struggles, as much as her limbs shake, and on any other occasion, Brienne would wish to tell her to wait outside, to spare her, but she is one of the few people who can help right now as Sassa is accustomed to helping Maggy around and is in fact one of the few people currently sober enough to tend to those in need.

We need you now, girl, so please, follow me as I tread through murky waters myself. There is no way of helping it now, or else there will be no help for those brave men.

Once the iron turned orange, Sassa carries the poker back, her hands wrapped in thick mittens normally used for handling the cooking pans.

Brienne wets her lips, looking the younger woman deep in the eye as she speaks, “We are going to hold him down, and you hold the poker in the wound. Did you understand that, Sassa?”

“I can’t,” the brunette stammers helplessly.

“Sassa, I am stronger than you. That means I can better hold him down than you can. Or else I would do this, believe me. But I need you to help us. We need you to help us do this. He needs your help,” Brienne argues. “He needs you, understand?”

The young woman swallows thickly as she steps closer, her eyes wide, her chest heaving.

“He will scream and thrash. Because it will cause him great pain, but you mustn’t stop until the wound is closed, you hear me?” Brienne warns her, bracing herself as the memory of the smell of
burning flesh return to her mind all of a sudden.

**But this is not Tarth. This is home now, and we must protect it because we still can.**

Sassa nods her head, her grip tightening around the poker. “Y, y, yes.”

She sucks in a deep breath before bending down, muttering what Brienne assumes are silent prayers to Eir under her breath. Sassa holds on to the poker the best she can as she leans over the thrashing man.

He shrieks so loudly once the hot iron touches his skin that Brienne’s ears start to ring as she holds on as tightly as she can. Calder is a strong, muscled man, though gladly, Brienne has handled stronger men than him before, which seem to pay off at last, if only to keep the man from thrashing and reopening his wounds. Brienne finds herself muttering into the man’s ear despite the fact that her voice does not carry over his screaming. She tells him that he will be fine, that once the pain ends, he will get to live on.

**In contrast to others.** Brienne already spotted one in the boat whom the others just shook their heads at. Another laid here with eyes open for minutes, the injuries to his chest far too great for even the mighty Eir to save him from sure demise.

However, Brienne hopes that those now gathered in Maggy’s house can be saved by them. She **prays** that they will.

Brienne snaps her head around when one of the men who had long since lost consciousness suddenly wakes up, letting out a high-pitched scream as he straightens up, instantly becoming aware of the pain crashing through him that the bittersweet bliss of unconsciousness shielded him from. Maggy bandaged the wound, but she already muttered to Brienne that he will likely not make it through the night as it was too gave, too much skin missing, too much blood lost.

**Just where are the other women when you need them?**

She watches in somewhat shock as Jaime moves up to the man and presses him down, back on the blood-stained furs. “Easy, easy. Breathe, soldier. Easy.”

Jaime looks over to her, and to Brienne’s shock, the look in his eyes says it all – he is there for support, at least for now. Though truly, even though she doesn’t trust him, what is Brienne supposed to do but trust Jaime right at this instance?

Jaime blows out air through his nostrils as he tries his best to hold the man down without dragging his chains across the wound. He heard the seer’s whisper – and he can see the damage done. That man will likely not make it through.

**The Boltons shall be damned. Skinning people alive. Who does that for the pleasure of it?**

“Easy,” Jaime keeps repeating, not knowing what else to tell the man to calm him during what will likely be his last moments in this world. And if the people can be believed in their faith, will pass over to the next, to Valhall.

“Y, you…,” the man stammers, swallowing thickly, chest heaving, only for more blood to pour out of him.

“I know, the Kingslayer, but I mean you no harm,” Jaime assures him quickly, and if he is not mistaken, the man laughs at him, though he is not sure what noises he makes between the moans and shouts of agony shaking his strong if frail seeming body.
“M dyin’ anyway,” he chuckles, then coughs, speckles of blood painting his face darker with every second passing.

“You should not speak,” Jaime argues. “Save your strengths.”

“I’ll pass, I know it. Knew it since I… I got on the boat,” the man moans. “They, they came f, from the North. Attacked… ou… out of nowhere.”

“You fought bravely, I am sure, to defend your home and your people,” Jaime says, surprising himself with the comforting tone he apparently finds in himself for one of the men holding him captive.

“Barely so. They… they al, almost…,” the man stammers, but Jaime interrupts him, “But you made it. You protected your men better than most.”

“For now.”

“Odin will welcome you at his table, I am certain of that,” Jaime assures him.

He never had to comfort men who were on the verge of dying. Aerys only ever stopped this most cruel game once they turned to ashes. There was no way to comfort, there was no way to assure them of what may lie beyond this pitiful existence. However, seeing the life bleeding out of the man before him right now reminds Jaime way too much of his times in King’s Landing, when the Mad King raged only ever had the words “burn them all” on his chapped lips. It brings it all back to his mind. The smell of burned flesh, of blood breaking out of the skin. And while it’s red he sees, it’s always tainted by endless green.

Jaime steals a glance over at Brienne, who seems still rather taken aback that he bothers to care. Though he can’t blame her. After the incident by the well, it is likely hard for Brienne to put some sort of faith in him not to strangle the man. Though truth be told, Jaime has no intention to kill a man who is dying anyway, unless he asked for the gift of mercy now. However, judging by the way the bandage gets soaked, Jaime is sure it’d be a short-lived mercy anyway.

Thinking back to his conversation with the Jarl’s daughter earlier by the weaving loom, when all was game and jest, it just seems to prove what they spoke of: How war is useless, senseless, but that sadly, too few share the sentiment. They are too idly focused on bereaving people of their protective skins. It’s all so godforsaken useless, whatever they do, because they do it for war. Because they believe that war is the way of getting to Odin’s table – to have peace there? What’s the point of that if you can have peace right here the same way? Jaime never understood it and never bothered to understand it either.

Looking at this man bleeding out life below him, Jaime sees only heroism in the act of protection against a great evil, and not in being the evil that came to the shores, their knives always sharp.

“Do you have a family?” Jaime asks the man, whose writhing ceases like the waves coming to a hold

“Wife ’nd daughter,” the man mutters between ragged breaths.

“They will be here shortly, I am sure,” Jaime tells him.

“Odin shall take me b’fore that,” he snorts, coughing up blood. “Better see me dead in dignity th’n… like this.”

“There is no disgrace in dying for a good cause,” Jaime argues. “I’m just sorry that this would be the last image for you, then. That of the Kingslayer.”
“At least you’re p, pretty to look at,” the man laughs, fresh blood bubbling up and pushing past his already blue lips. Jaime returns the smile uncertainly. He knows he wouldn’t have to care, doesn’t have to care, maybe even shouldn’t. Jaime doesn’t know this man. And if there is one thing Tywin Lannister hammered into his skull, then it is that they are the only ones that matter.

So why does he bother about this man? Why doesn’t he just sit in his corner and let the wench go about trying to save her people? They are not his people, not his to protect, not his to keep, to care about.

Why won’t his fingers stay away to let the man pass, but hold on?

Why should I care for the people who captured me? Imprisoned me?

Though perhaps Jaime holds on for much more selfish reasons than he’d want to admit to himself. Because when he looks at the man writhing to his touch, Jaime sees… himself. That is the death Jaime always envisioned for himself. On the battlefield, protecting his people. Sword in hand, waiting for the Valkyries to come down with their chariots to gather him and take him away to Valhalla, if that place even exists. That is how Jaime always meant to go.

But now that Jaime sees what it looks like, he is no longer so sure. Somehow, Jaime finds himself holding on to life after all, rather than the heroic death. Even if it’s that of a man he barely knows, even though it is a man of a people not his, of a people who imprisoned him, humiliated him, would rather have him gone.

It must be madness.

The man flashes Jaime a very crooked grin, his breathing becoming shallower by the second.

Jaime looks over to Brienne and the seer, who are busy wrapping a man’s leg that was skinned off the shins. He chews on his lower lip before bowing his head slightly so that the man can hear him well even above the shouts and whimpering filling the longhouse with the song of war.

“Do you want me to get the seer to say some prayers?” he asks. The man makes a wet snorting noise that gets caught in his throat.

“She b, better make sure the o, other bast’rds live,” the man huffs. “Wasn’t ever too faithful ‘nyway.”

Jaime licks his lips, not sure whether he is frowning or smirking slightly, his entire face feels numb and cold. “Me neither.”

His seer, against the odds of the function he is meant to fulfill, made Jaime lose faith in faith itself, leaving him with nothing but distant hopes of Valhalla, the afterlife, a comforting kind of thought just in case he is about to be proven wrong in his doubts.

The man’s lips curl into what the man must believe to be a smile, though it only ever comes across as a distorted grimace. Jaime smirks at him as the last breath leaves his body and he comes to a halt, grows still.

Is dead.

Over.

Ends.

If his soul is carried to Valhalla… only the Gods will know.
Because the realm of humans is filled with blood and screams, war and suffering, compressed to a small longhouse, by some almost tranquil fjord at the borders of a realm that is far too busy trying to gain territory, treasures, and one’s seat amongst the ranks of the Allfather. It is filled with so much suffering that Valhalla, real or not, seems like the only escape.

Jaime holds on to the man a while longer, even after his features have long since stilled and his body starts to grow cold, finding his fingers as still as the man’s body is now, unsure whether he is holding on to the man or holding on to himself. The taste of that thought is bitter on his tongue, fresh bile bubbling up in Jaime’s mouth.

This could be him. In a way, this is him, a version of him.

One possible future, one potential outcome.

And Jaime is not at all sure whether that is how he wants to go, in the arms of a man who is a stranger, is an enemy, alone, the family dead, but at the least, a death at the tip of a sword, the edge of a battle axe.

Once Jaime finds his muscles moving again, he lets go, surprised at the small quiver running through his fingertips as he withdraws to his corner, feeling the dread for people not his, feeling remorse for a dead that may be his.

However, as he allows his gaze to wander, Jaime has to realize that the world does not stand still, not even in that small longhouse that should not make a single difference, as the three women carry on, scramble over bloodied furs, hold down men who move like puppets, guided by strings that seem to consist of nothing but their pain.

A different kind of Valkyries, not gathering those fallen, but yelling at them to hold on, to keep going, curse at them not to give up, to be strong.

And perhaps that is as much of Valhalla as anyone is going to get on this wretched earth, Jaime thinks to himself, watching, observing, his hands still shaking.

“It just won’t end,” Maggy mutters as they move to the next man. “Sassa, get more wine. We have a lot of wounds to boil to keep from festering, or else they may not die right here at this very moment, but once morning rises!”

The young girl hurries outside, likely glad to get a break from the smells and pictures to haunt them all as they will lie in bed to night.

Brienne holds on to the man’s shoulder next in line so that Maggy can take a look at the injuries to his side, covered in deep, bleeding gashes.

“Vern, you have to keep still for now,” Maggy tells the man writhing as she assesses the injuries, her voice even, but nonetheless demanding, certain, something to cut through even such a storm with a clarity that Brienne wished she could muster, too.

Vern only ever groans in reply, but then quickly focuses his attention on Brienne, fix on her, don’t let her go. She swallows, trying to be more like Maggy, because she needs the calm, she needs the strength.

Brienne knows him ever since she was a child as someone who came with on the long voyage to this place now their home. Vern was one of the few people who always paid respect to her. He was kind to her, even, Brienne can still remember. He always had a smile to spare when most others scowled at her. Back when they first came to the village, or rather, built it, Vern was one of the few who ever
made it up the hill to see after young Brienne when her father was away.

Brienne can still recall that Vern was the one who gave her her first toy ever since she had to leave it all back on Tarth. A doll, filled with straw, covered in rough cloth, painted on with coal and crushed berries. She loved it fiercely and laid it beside her head on the pillow every night she went to bed. Though it now disappeared into her small wooden chest in her chamber. After all, her times of being a girl are over in a long, long time now.

She is surprised when she can feel Vern’s clammy hand against her freckled cheek. “Tyra.”

Brienne blinks, her eyes briefly focusing on Maggy, who offers her a grimace at best.

“I thought I’d lost you back on Tarth, during the Tragedy. But you came back, my Tyra,” Vern goes on.

Brienne knows that he had a daughter who was about six-and-ten by the time the Tragedy of Tarth took place. He seems to see her now in Brienne’s stead. She was also blonde and had short hair, as far as Brienne can recall from what she gathered from other people’s stories over the years.

“Tyra,” he mutters again, his eyes pleading Brienne, begging her, and so she finds herself answering a call that is not meant for her, stuttering, “Y, yes.”

Maggy nods at Brienne to keep going since it keeps him from moving too much as she sees about his wounds.

“Where were you all this time, my sweet child?” Vern asks, now somewhere completely else inside his mind, though in reality, he is writing on bloodied furs in a small longhouse far away from home, far away from Tyra.

“Doesn’t matter. I am here now, right? That’s all that matters,” Brienne says, the words bitter on her tongue. She was never good at lying, and it feels wrong to speak in the voice of a woman she never knew, but he is begging her, Vern is begging her even now.

So, can that be wrong?

“I missed you so,” Vern says, coughing.

Brienne licks her lips, her voice shaking as she speaks again, “And I… missed you.”

“You… remember… when your mother sang to you and you hated it?” he sighs.

“Sure,” she answers, though the reply should actually no, because she does not, of course not, but so long it keeps some of the pain out of him, Brienne will pretend, no bother.

Right?

“You only ever stopped when I sang it,” Vern says with a twisted smile, his eyes hooded.

“You have a nice singing voice,” Brienne tells him. She heard it some many times during their feasts. Vern is always one to raise his voice first, to sing the old songs, the ballades about Tarth, its sapphire blue waters, its creeks and mountains, the delightful ones and those heavy with remorse over a place lost, a home destroyed.

“I should have let you go when you said you wanted to, Tyra,” Vern moans.

“It’s alright now. Don’t think of it,” Brienne assures him.
Vern’s daughter wanted to travel to the mainlands, Brienne knows, but that is all she ever heard of the conflict between the two. Her father was enraged, always lamented about that “stubborn girl” when he fixed the jarl’s boats. And the Gods will know that he builds the most wonderful ships, as though they were carved out of a single piece of wood, cutting through water like the sharpest blade.

And dolls.

“I think about it all day long. That we parted in… dispute,” Vern goes on, leaning his head to the side with a moan as Maggy probes at his wounds.

“But I am here now,” Brienne tells him quickly, trying to pull him back to her, away from the pain. And in fact, Vern opens his eyes again, smiling at her tiredly, or rather, smiling at Tyra tiredly.

“Aye, you came back to me. I knew you couldn’t leave me forever,” Vern agrees.

“I never could, no,” Brienne agrees. “But you know that you have to get better again, right? Our people still need you. You and your ships.”

“But I want to stay with you,” Vern argues, and only now does Brienne understand that while he speaks to her as Tyra, he still knows that she died during the ambush, never made it to the mainlands, but was not in the house when they came charging, leaving the father with the house empty, with no one to fetch and bring to the boats he builds to get people to safety.

“And you will. But for now, stay here,” Brienne argues, finding her role reversed, now begging him to stay, not to go.

“It’s hard,” he groans, writhing as another wave of agony rushes through him.

“I know, but you are strong. Stronger than most. You will hold on – for me, right? For your daughter, you will, yes?” Brienne asks, licking her lips, her fingers enclosing his shaking hand.

May the Gods forgive me.

“Anything… for you,” Vern sighs, his voice no more than a whisper as he closes his eyes, slipping into unconsciousness.

Brienne turns her attention back to Maggy. “How bad is it?”

“Bad, but not… impossible to survive. The bleeding is wearing down,” the blind seer replies. “His heart is strong.”

“So strong that it loves a daughter with the same fierceness that he felt when she was still alive.

Maggy finishes the bandages with Brienne’s help, putting them on as tightly as they can.

“We have to move on,” the seer urges the jarl’s daughter. Brienne nods her head, rubs her bloodied fingers on her dress and moves on to the next man, to the next life she tries to hold with her big hands, hoping that, for once, the palms fitting that of a man will prove to be useful to hold on to lives on the verge of slipping away far too soon.

And so they carry on, without relent, without rest. Brienne just goes through the motions, trying to keep her emotions buried deep inside her, far away to where no one can reach.

She cannot allow for weakness now. She has to be strong now. For her people, for every man who
fought as bravely as they did to defend their home.

“That was the last one,” Maggy announces, pulling Brienne out of her thoughts, back to the coppery smell of dried blood, the soft mewls, the drawn-out groans, the mumbles, the moans of pain, the whimpers of agony, the heavy breathing, the sighs, and the silence spreading across some who were part of the chorus before.

“The both of you did very well,” Maggy says, tapping Brienne on the arm, before she sees about young Sassa who just fell back on her buttocks, her legs no longer supporting her weight.

Brienne is not sure if she manages to smile at Maggy, her entire body feels by far too numb to notice, to care. However, she reminds herself that some live, that they managed to save people and didn’t lose all of them. Brienne motions back to Vern. Perhaps he will be awake enough to remember her face instead of just seeing the mirror image of the daughter he lost on Tarth.

Maybe he will remember the doll, or when he sang a lullaby to me when Father was gone and I feared that he would be eaten by the vicious green fire, she thinks to herself as she steps over the reddened furs.

Brienne stops by the furs where they put him, her entire body going rigid at the sight now before her. Her eyes widen to the point that it aches.

“He is… Vern is…,” she stammers loudly for the seer to catch and scramble over to Brienne. The healer bends down, taps the man’s cheek, leans he wrinkly cheek on his chest, listens, listens closely, but then lifts her head again, shaking her head, assuring Brienne of something she knew the moment she looked at his still form.

“I thought he was…,” Brienne mutters, her lips barely moving apart as she speaks.

“The injuries were treated to the best of our abilities. The Gods seemingly decided to take him despite that fact. That was no one’s fault, child,” Maggy assures her as she stands back up. “The Valkyries meant to take him, and so they did.”

“But he was fine…,” Brienne argues, the air catching in her throat.

Vern was the one she was rather convinced of would survive the injuries. They weren’t that great. Painful, yes, but not nearly as bad of the man now moaning beside him, who’s had a knife run through his belly three times to take out a chunk of flesh.

“He fought as bravely as he could, till his last breath,” Maggy tells her. “There is nothing that we could have done. You should take solace in that we succeeded in saving more than half of them. That is more than I ever expected when they brought them into my house.”

“That still means that too many died. A single one is too much,” is all Brienne says, voice shaking, heart racing, eyes glistening.

Because she swore to protect them all – and every man who dies is a failure of that oath, of that promise.

“We can’t save them all. We can’t protect them all,” Maggy argues.

“But we should,” Brienne insists, her eyes burning from unshed tears.

The seer taps against her knee softly. “Child, if things went the way we wanted at all times, life would be all but a dream. This… is the reality, however painful, however cruel… but you should
remember that for their bravery, they will certainly have earned their spot at Odin’s table to feast for all times.”

“Yes,” Brienne agrees solemnly.

“If you want me to, I can announce who…,” Maggy means to offer, but that snaps Brienne out of her stasis at once, finding her muscles move again as she turns to the healer.

“No, I will do it. My father would do it otherwise. He is not here yet, so this is… my responsibility, my duty,” Brienne argues, trying to sound steady where her entire body feels like collapsing.

A bad omen indeed.

“I don’t mind doing it, child,” Maggy assures her, surely aware of Brienne’s distress against the odds of the façade she tries to keep up right at this moment. “Old seers are meant to bring bad news. That’s what we do.”

“Look after the other men. We don’t want to lose any more of them,” Brienne tells her, unshed tears standing in her eyes. She turns around. “Kingslayer? You are coming with me.”

Jaime gets up wordlessly and follows Brienne outside. If not for the nature of their relation, he likely would have uttered an apologetic word right there, but Jaime knows that his words mean nothing, so he rather walks on in silence and makes his way back outside with Brienne, the sky above them pitch black, not a single star shining down on them.

How fitting, he thinks to himself bitterly.

Jaime watches as the men gather around her the moment on she steps out of the longhouse, their eyes searching for guidance, filled with mixtures of fear and vain hope, anger, fury, and resignation.

Brienne lets out a light cough as she folds her bloody hands in her back, standing as tall as she can, lifting her chin high, and a bit higher still.

“Tonight, we lost way too many good men,” Brienne begins, trying her best to keep her voice steady. “Though of that I am certain, they will all go to Odin’s Great Hall to feast at his table, will recount battle stories and share it over horns of mead, for their bravery and will to fight for our people.”

“Who’s died?” is the one question that comes back to her, and while Brienne knew it was coming, it still knocks the air out of her for a moment.

She sucks in a deep breath, the cold air turning to mist around her mouth. Brienne recounts the name one by one, pausing after every name, letting it stand there, making it matter like the man mattered who fell.

Jaime can see the men trying to stay stoic as more and more names pile up. After all, their folk does not weep over the dead, they are meant to be happy for them to be able to join Odin at his table. However, looking at the men now before him, young and old alike, Jaime can’t help but note the difference, the reality of loss rather than the heroic tale told about it at althings and feasts. There is shock, there is mourning, there is grief, there is loss, there are tears unshed, and even some tears falling.

Though that is perhaps what is bound to happen when you live the life this small folk took for itself: They truly care about each other. That is something Jaime has never known at home. Be it at the capitol or at the Rock, every man fought for himself. They fought together, surely, but looking at
these men, Jaime has to realize that this is the kind of companionship his men and himself included never achieved, no matter how many hours they spent at sea, huddled over by their camps as they rode through the country to carry out their jarl’s will. The men who fell were mourned, given the honors, and certainly, their loved ones shed tears for them. However, the anguish he can see flash across each member’s features when a new name is announced strikes him right at this moment.

What strikes Jaime more, though, is only the woman holding him captive. For that Brienne shies away from acting like a jarl’s daughter, she fills into the role if she must, and Brienne must right at this moment, no doubt. At the same time, Jaime can see how much it pains Brienne, and a small part of him, for some reason, feels with her, even though, deep down, Jaime knows he shouldn’t care.

She is the enemy, after all. They are to each other. That is the nature of their folk, the nature of them, the world entirely, always at war.

And Jaime wants to get away, wants to be back home, around the few people who care about him in all earnest and would mourn his loss.

And yet… It doesn’t seem to matter right at this moment.

“Make all preparation for the ceremonies. Once the others get here… we should see about it that we send those who fell on their last journey. As to the rest… my Father, your Jarl, will answer the questions in due time. For now, let us stand united in our sadness for the brothers and fathers we lost, but let us…” Brienne speaks aloud, hesitating for a moment before she goes on, “… let us rejoice for them that they got to die as they were, as heroes, protectors of our people. And let us thank Odin and Frigg that we were able to keep some. Let us thank Eir for guiding our hands. The Gods may show mercy with us all.”

She bows lightly, and Jaime can see that the hands Brienne kept in her back all the while have not once stopped shaking as she spoke.

Jaime follows her wordlessly as Brienne walks away, behind the longhouse, to where no one is except for them and the shadows looming all around them. Brienne leans her great back against the wooden wall, but then slides down until she lands on the ground with a small thud. Now in the pale light of the crescent moon high in the sky, Jaime can see all the blood on her, all the life that poured out of the soldiers and onto her, all the life that was spilled on furs and jetties. Brienne’s arms rest on her angled legs, a slight shiver running through her every now and then as she breathes shallowly.

For a moment, Jaime is tempted to say something, but then thinks better of it, and just stands there, wondering for only just a moment if someone would weep for him, too, outside his family. If someone would shake like that for his loss, though he or she may not know him well.

It takes a while until the old seer hobbles up to them from behind the longhouse. It’s small wonder that she doesn’t have to see anything to know what is going on.

“If you liked, you can wash up in my house, child,” Maggy tells Brienne, trying to offer some solace. “And perchance talk a while, hm? Have some brewed herbs that taste horrible but calm the nerves, I assure you? We could say some prayers perhaps. Consult the Gods. They surely have a lot to tell tonight.”

“I should be on my way home,” Brienne says, looking ahead, her gaze empty. “I left… some stew on the stove that will soon turn to ash if I don’t get it off the fire.”

Which is a lie, Jaime knows. He saw her prepare the food, and Brienne did not leave it unattended like that before she went to the weaving loom. She made sure to put out the fire before she went, the
way she always does, seemingly as weary of the flames as he.

“But perhaps you would like to…,” Maggy means to say, but Brienne interrupts her hoarsely, “I really have to be home. I have to be.”

The seer nods her head slowly. “Alright. I will fetch one of the men to bring you.”

“I can go on my own,” Brienne insists, her defiance keeping her spirits aflame even when the fire seems doused right at this moment.

“I am just saying…,” Maggy means to say, but the young woman only ever taps the older one on the shoulder to signal her no.

“I can go on my own,” Brienne repeats with more determination this time, looking at Jaime blearily once before she stands surprisingly steadily on her feet.

“Be safe, child,” Maggy mutters.

“You, too,” Brienne replies numbly, already starting to walk away.

If Jaime is not mistaken, the seer glowers at him as they go, but he knows that now is not the time to ask whether that is true.

The two start to make their way back up the mount. Jaime watches the tall, blonde woman the whole time, though he can’t make out much of her as the darkness of the night embraces her tightly to the point that he can hear her pant.

Brienne’s mind is someplace far away, of that he is sure. Her former home, most likely. At least that was the place the man she talked to kept mentioning, Jaime heard.

Tarth. A place of tragedy.

Jaime heard the tales, though some claim that they are untrue, tales blown out of proportion, distorted until something surreal remained.

As it appears, there is at least an ounce of truth of them, though.

Yet, what is far more prominent on Jaime’s mind is the fact that he catches himself walking beside her, matching his step with Brienne’s pace, when he should use the chance to overpower her. While Jaime perceives it to be without honor to slip away during a moment such as the one that just occurred by the jetty, now it would be taking advantage of a grave situation.

Not honorable either, but better than what would have been before.

He’d just have to go, he’d just have to take a chance, and not mind the dishonor of the act. One shove to the side, and Jaime could make his escape in North-Western direction. Though, apparently, he can’t bring himself to sink that low to take advantage of other people’s grief. For that, Brienne’s eyes are haunting him way too much even in the dark, as are the images of the man whose life left him while Jaime applied pressure to his wounds. It was as though he looked into a future that may well be his, and Jaime found himself dreading not so much the death itself, but to leave people behind whom he loves and cares about.

He just wants this night to be over. That is the one thing that Jaime knows.

At last, the small house comes into sight. Jaime didn’t realize until now just how exhausted he feels,
as though he carried buckets of water back and forth for days. However, to his irritation, Brienne does not take him to the house, but back to the barn with her weaving loom.

For a moment, he wants to question, wants to argue about going to the house, get to bed, but the pace of her step silences him.

They get inside the now dark barn, only lit by the moonlight shining through the windows as it finally breaks through the clouds to allow for some light that the stars won’t permit otherwise. Brienne hooks Jaime’s chains up like she always does whenever she makes him sit with her while she weaves. He already means to protest, but before Jaime can, Brienne is already by the weaving loom, picking up the stick shuttle with shaky hands, tears now freely running down her freckled cheeks, steadily threading blood into the pattern she created before all Hel broke loose.

Whatever quip he has on his mind, it fades away as Jaime watches Brienne weave all the bad into the pattern, all the dread dried on her fingertips she did her best to conceal in front of the other men, kept it in her back.

He licks his lips, surprising himself when he speaks up at last. “There is nothing that you could have done about it. It was inevitable that some died.”

“It was evitable. We shouldn’t have sent them, easy as that. Had we not sent them out, they’d still be with us. They would have returned to give their blessings to the newlyweds,” Brienne argues, not looking at him, her eyes fixed on the weaving loom, the threads quivering to her unsteady touch.

The stick shuttle keeps moving unsteadily, like a ship caught in a storm.

“You should rest,” Jaime asks.

Brienne is silent for a long moment, the stick shuttle stopping for a moment, the storm taking a rest, too, if only for a time.

“I made this for the common hall, actually, but now…,” Brienne says after a while. “As you know, the norns weave to determine all our destiny… what happened tonight is now all our destiny. And so… if I weave their blood into the fabric meant to hang in the common hall once it’s done… it will leave a part of them with us that will never be forgotten.”

Jaime says nothing at that, just leans back against the wall and lets her weave her grief into every thread, every patch of red turning brown.

Eventually, Brienne stops with the weaving seemingly meant to replace the weeping, though she wouldn’t ever admit that, of course, or so Jaime reckons.

Even less so to me, he knows. She wouldn’t mean to weep upon the Kingslayer’s shoulder, would she?

Glancing at Brienne, smeared with blood, looking like one of the dead herself, all Jaime can think of is how useless all of this hatred and fight is, if this is the result. Women weeping through the threads, women crying, men hiding away their tears, destiny woven, and all that for some land, some crop, some worldly thing they won’t get to carry with themselves to the next world anyway.

He is so sick and tired of war. Sick and tired of death looming around life like a thick mist hangs over the fjord.
Jaime watches as Brienne walks away from the weaving loom, and over to a small basket she brought in earlier when they went in here for the first time that day. She takes something out and then walks over to him. Jaime is stunned when she holds a piece of cloth out to her, which turns out to be a red dyed tunic, rather rough in the making, but a deep shade of red, sturdy, something meant to carry on for a longer time.

“That is your reward for not running off when you had any chance to,” she tells him bluntly, her face and voice completely blank now.

Jaime is perfectly stunned, staring at the red piece of clothing she holds out to him.

“Do you have any intention to run off tonight?” Brienne goes on to ask.

“Not tonight, no,” Jaime says, meaning it.

Brienne nods numbly before she starts to untie him whereas Jaime runs his fingers over the fabric that is now his reward covered in red.

They make their way back into the house, their steps even heavier now. The two stand in the kitchen for a long time, saying nothing, but then, Brienne moves to the window. From the corner of his eye, Jaime can see torches in the distance, a procession heading towards the town below.

And soon, the light of the torches is followed by the echoes of cries and whimpers, resonating through the woods, announcing the arrival of the mothers, sisters, and daughters now to mourn the loss of the men who left their lives in the longhouse where they went out to celebrate a new part of life to be created in the union of marriage, where happiness was meant to battle the darkness all around them.

While they probably don’t know who died yet, it’s not hard to guess that a lot gave their lives, and that of those who lived, some may still die or never truly recover from the gruesome injuries coming from sharp knives.

“Do you want to go with them?” Jaime asks quietly.

“My presence would offer no solace to them,” Brienne replies, eyes fixed on the torches passing by outside.

“It did to the men,” Jaime argues.

“It won’t to them,” Brienne argues, shaking her head.

“It’s a bad omen, after all,” she adds with a feigned smile, before she steps away from the window and walks over to the small basin and plunges her hands into the water, which soon fades to red.
Missing Trust

Chapter Summary

Mistrust spread around the village ever since the attack of the Boltonmen. Not only the villagers became weary of their guest of House Lannister, but Jaime also has his doubts whether these men will honor their vows.

A walk through the woods may put to test for Jaime and Brienne whether their mistrust is justified.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, thanks for sticking around and for the lovely comments I received (even though I shamefuly have to admit that replying took me forever, but life was crazy like that lately, and then I felt too hesitant to reply without the new chapter done... and anyway, I am sorry and I read all of the comments with such delight, rest assured).

This (very long) chapter is also supposed to show the two different sides and how mistrust on both sides can bring about assumptions that may escalate a situation (sometimes even unnecessarily so). It's something I found an interesting plot point to toy around with.

Anyway, I hope you are going to enjoy this chapter. As per usual, fighting scenes are not my forte to write, so please beware, lol.

Oh yeah, and Merry Christmas to y'all.

Much love! ♥♥♥

Ever since the horrendous night that took the lives of far too many warriors for this small town, Jaime found himself in a worse position as a prisoner than he inherited before the night weeping echoed through the woods for until the sun rose again. While Brienne was rather silent for a day or two, walking around the house as though she was a ghost, wordlessly, silently going about her chores, the wench has grown much more hostile towards him at some point that Jaime can’t put his finger on. And that even though he didn’t do anything… much.

Jaime was even mindful at first, the Gods will be his witnesses: He kept his sharp tongue in his mouth instead of using it for some many jests to tease some reactions out of her to catch the wench off-guard, and that even though there was plenty opportunity for it. However, something shifted from one day to the other, and suddenly, Brienne started to pull him around again as though he was a dog, barked orders through gritted teeth, and acted as though Jaime was the enemy who flayed their men.
And that even though, in reality, it was the Boltonmen who seemingly tried and still try to push their territories in the South for whatever the reason.

However, Jaime can’t bring himself to shoulder the blame for the wrongs of others, even less so for the wrongs of the Bolton clan. He has enough of blame to carry around with him. And some of which, if not most of it, is a burden Jaime carries without ever letting anyone know how much he wants to rid himself of it, wants to let it all down. Because it shouldn’t be his bundle to carry through life, through battle, all the way to the afterlife, and yet it keeps weighing heavy on his shoulders, and Jaime has no illusion about that changing any time soon.

*But that doesn’t mean I will carry that as well.*

Jaime overheard Brienne and the Jarl talking about the next immediate steps following the attack on their borders, as both were made aware of the urgency in the most painful way. Scouts were sent out to inform the nearby villages of the Boltons’ ships seemingly cutting through the water of the warmer regions now, *for whatever reason that may be.*

He still didn’t wrap his mind around this, no matter how often Jaime found himself pondering the attack, the possible reasons behind it. And that despite the fact that Jaime knows he shouldn’t care about it because his mind should be focused on nothing but his escape from the Jarl and his mannish daughter.

And yet, he went over it night for night, no matter his effort to resist the thoughts, the memories of a man dying in his arms: If the Boltonmen wanted to raid, they should have attacked the village, not some villagers on patrol. Instead, they took a bunch of men out in cold blood who likely had no treasures with them, safe for whatever provisions they had onboard. It was strategically unwise, simple as that, and Jaime does not take Roose Bolton for a fool who would make such vital attacks to give away his location without following through with a raid. You don’t let your enemy know where you are, unless you know that it is far too late for them to fight back or get away. While surely dangerous, and most definitely insane for all Jaime can say, judging by the Flayed Man of House Bolton as a sigil, the head of this clan is not unwise. In fact, Roose Bolton is very much like Jaime’s father in that regard. Such a move wasn’t only simply pointless but also reckless.

Or even *if* the village was not what they wanted, it was foolish not to make an attempt to chase the villagers away regardlessly, if only to ensure that no one would know what they wanted and what they carried away. Because the Boltons, however gruesome, are too small a clan to defend themselves against an army like that of Jaime’s father.

*So, what were they doing in these waters? Northerners don’t like the summer heat.*

Jaime is fairly certain that they are not here for what he travelled to these lands for. He is actually quite sure of that. Just like there are no men like him, there appears to be no man or woman on the same mission as Jaime.

*However much of a foolish thing that was from the very start, I told Father often enough, but when does the man ever listen? He wouldn’t even listen to Tyrion who speaks sense most of his time, only out of spite.*

Jaime asked Brienne whether she saw any reason behind the Boltons’ attack, telling her in all honesty that he was curious to find out if she knew something he did not, but the stubborn wench was having none of it. Brienne only ever let him know that it was “absolutely none” of his concern, if she didn’t pull on the leash or gave Jaime another smack to whatever body part was within her reach to end the conversation.
And the woman should know better, Jaime thinks to himself angrily. She shouldn’t let her feelings get the better of her.

Brienne is a shieldmaiden, after all. In times of war, you lose men. You lose them to those with better weapons or those who outsmart you because they have a better tactic, because they get you by surprise. While Jaime understands that around here, they mourn the dead more than he is used to it back at the Rock or the capitol, the wench should realize that this is the way it goes in this world. Similarly, the woman should understand that she can’t put the blame on him for the world being a flame short before catching higher at all times.

War is a constant condition, a sickness that won’t fade, a cut that won’t heal.

It never ends.

It’s a circle running round and round again, a snake biting its own tail.

Brienne should know that people will come to get that which is theirs, will come to get their crops, steal them if they must, take them by force if it pleases them, and burn the rest to the ground the way a former king once liked it oh too much.

Burn them all. Burn them all. Burn them all… as he would say.

Men in the North are short on food, with Winter extending its cold, ghastly claws, looming beyond the Wall much sooner than was to be expected. That is the only explanation Jaime can fathom for the Boltonmen attacking.

Hunger drives anyone into folly, I should know best.

Of course they venture South in the hope to gain some flesh, some bone, the marrow inside it, and some corn if they can get their filthy hands on it. That is not at all surprising. That is natural. Humans are not much different from the animals they hunt. Everyone fights for his own survival, for his own continuation.

That is what makes you keep your feet still when a king cooks people in their armors.

That is what keeps your mouth sealed as you stand vigilant and think to yourself that you should protect the Queen from the monster of her husband, but get told that you are to serve the King, not her.

That is what makes you accept punishment for a crime that was no crime, from a King who was no king until you made him such, and you his killer, his slayer.

You want to continue, you want to go on, for your family, your clan, and even people who are not, want to keep fighting even when you feel like giving up.

In the end, people are only ever concerned with themselves, their families at best, their clans, but not the world at large. That is too wide a focus, and war keeps narrowing it down each time there is a chance to open one’s eyes wider.

The chaos of war provides structures, provides enemies and friends, drawn lines not to cross in the sand.

Brienne should know better. She should know all this, and stop blaming him for the world being that narrow-minded.

Not that the wench caught on to that just yet, Jaime thinks to himself, watching the wretched woman
as she fixes the left vambrace made of boil leather around her muscular forearm.

“What are you up to, care to remind me, wench? And am I invited or is it the muddy pen for me again?” Jaime asks, likely boring himself as much as her with constantly questions about her actions.

Though truly, what else does Jaime have to do?

At this rate, I won’t die of starvation or the cold in the muddy pen but of boredom and annoyance. And Odin may forbid if that is how I am meant to go!

“No muddy pen if you can behave yourself,” Brienne tells him, pulling on the leather cords to ensure the vambraces don’t reopen.

“We both know that you think I cannot,” he huffs.

Bienne rolls her broad shoulders in a circular motion, her features stony. “Well, you have not bothered to try to bring proof for the opposite.”

“My red tunic begs to differ. I earned this thing,” Jaime points out to her, gesturing down himself as much as his constraints allow.

Jaime was surprised that despite the wench’s misgivings as of late, Brienne made no attempt to take the tunic away from him again. He honestly believed that she would use it as a reward she would withdraw, like you take a child’s toy away to teach it a lesson. Yet, Brienne let him wear the crimson tunic ever since. And even though Jaime would never say it out loud, he was glad for it, to finally have something red in his life again that isn’t blood, a red reminding him of home, of the Rock, the banner bearing the Lion of Casterly Rock flapping in the wind.

Needless to mention that Jaime must say, for that the woman looks as though she could never thread a needle with her big hands, her needlework is about just fine. Not perfect or elegant by any means, but no matter how much the chains chafe against it, no matter how much he may pull on it, the cloth stays in its original form. The stitches hold.

She may not care for elegance, be it in herself or her needlework, but she is set on stability, on endurance, and such she manages to achieve.

Brienne looks at Jaime for a longer moment, and he feels like pulling back for a second, considering how pain flashes across her face at the memories returning to her about the fateful night when she gave him the red tunic to wear. Yet, once Brienne’s features growing back to stone again, Jaime finds the resolve bleeding out of him too fast to bother to say something to lessen the blow.

The wench has to learn some lessons, too, as it appears, about reality, about how thing aren’t like they seem in the great tales about Odin and his sons and daughters, the great heroes of Asgard fighting the serpents and dark elves, the demons breathing fire and the monstrous wolves devouring the moon.

“Are you that desperate to get back into the muddy pen?” she asks, not even bothering to look at him again.

Jaime tilts his head to the side. “No, I am just too much of a wild beast to allow myself to be beaten into submission.”

“Others tend to call it being pig-headed stubborn,” Brienne huffs, pushing up from her furs.

“A condition you seem to know very well yourself,” he scoffs.
“It seems so,” the tall woman replies curtly, stretching out her long limbs.

“So? To where are we headed?” Jaime asks again.

After all, the world is an endless repetition.

“You are about to see, Kingslayer, unless you want to take the pen instead. That is always up to you,” Brienne announces, her voice heavy with sarcasm, though her lips bring froth no smile, however small. And Jaime must admit, he starts to miss the fractions in time when they verbally wrestled and the wench seemingly was amused, at least. Yet, as of now, she is nothing but annoyed, has nothing but misgiving to give, and that in itself reminds Jaime only ever the more that he has to get away.

*Or else the woman will change her mind once more and slay me for the wrongs of others no matter her father’s plans of bringing me to the althing which cannot come soon enough, truly.*

“I already know that pen inside out, as it knows me. I never thought I would have mud in places like this,” Jaime laments, gesturing at his crotch. “And I may add that you do a poor job at cleaning that mess up.”

“So you learn something after all,” Brienne replies, holstering her dagger around her thick waist. “If only all corners of the muddy pen and to where sand can travel.”

“Where is your dear father at?” Jaime questions.

“None of your concern,” she hisses.

“To say it one more time because apparently, you never seem to listen to me, wench: What am I supposed to do with that information? What harm could I bring upon you if I knew? Unless you fear that I will escape at once and open his throat with my bare hands, that is. Once I make a run for it, rest assured, wench, my least concern will be to open your father from naval to chin. I will try my best to get out of this wretched place and never look back.”

He will worry about his own home again, and his home only, the one thing his father was right about all along.

_We are the only ones that matter. And while Father only means our family, I mean our people. And for those I have to return, have to repay a debt I took for myself when I took on the White. And a Lannister always pays his debts, after all._

“Your way of reassuring people is quite odd, Kingslayer,” she points out to him, looking at her dagger despite the fact that her hands no longer move to buckle the belt around her waist, but just rest on the leather, as though to ensure to keep her attention away from him like a rare good.

“I don’t care about your reassurance, wench,” Jaime huffs. “I am just pointing out some truths to you that you won’t see in your stubborn head.”

Brienne lets out a sigh, glancing out the small window, the sun filtering in to make dust seem like faintly shining stars.

“… He is in the village, talking to the women who lost family that night. There are some arrangements to be made about the family’s lands, to ensure that all is taken care of… now with their men gone. And Father wants to be sure that everything his handled justly.”

Jaime sticks his tongue in the inside of his cheek, almost feeling bad for asking. Because he can
instantly see the pain washing over her face, can see how Brienne likely sees the torches again, on
their sad procession down the mount.

In fact, he can do more than see it, hear it, he can feel it right in his guts.

_And how utterly unpleasant and unnecessary is that?!

“And your little, furry pests?” Jaime asks anyway, ignoring the turn in his stomach that it causes him.
“The dark one didn’t give me a good morning kiss just yet. I was quite surprised at the lack of dog
slobber across my face.”

“By the borders, watching out for more possible intruders,” Brienne replies, her eyes still fixed on the
small window. “One can never know if they return… or if others come to our shores…”

Under different circumstances, Jaime may even bring himself to praise her for having trained those
beasts to carry out such task independently, but by now he knows his words are wind to Brienne,
just like Jaime doesn’t know why he should bother when the wench has nothing but misgiving for
him in turn.

“Well, if the Boltonmen strike again, they are not likely to come from the land side, but from the
sea,” Jaime points out to her.

“I am aware,” Brienne huffs, not bothering to reward him with so much as eye contact. “However, it
can’t harm to patrol the borders a little more closely after the recent ambush. One can never know.
Some people like to be unpredictable and even dare to change tactic. In fact, some build their entire
tactic on being unpredictable.”

“Oh, that one thing you can know for certain: So long you have resources other people want, they
will keep hunting you for them,” Jaime tells her.

“To say it one more time, I am aware, Kingslayer,” Brienne says, mimicking his tone from earlier.
Jaime wrinkles his nose, tilting his head to the other side. Brienne motions over to where she hooked
him up, undoes the knot, and then starts to pull the older man along. He groans at the tug on his
wrists, but knows it falls on deaf ears anyway.

And so, out of the house they go, over moist, thick grass tickling against their calves as they come
closer and closer to the woods at the top of the small hill. Once they pass the well, which is on the
way up, Jaime has a brief moment of remembrance where he sees the two of them fighting on the
ground again, to the point that he can feel the healing scars on his head throbbing for a moment or
two.

_I almost had her there_, he thinks to himself as they pass by. _And Gods know what trouble it would
have saved me if I had turned out victor back then._

But then their images vanish into the mist still hanging only inches above the moist ground, so Jaime
turns his head to the front again, watching Brienne as she guides him until the grass fades out and
fallen leaves and brushes start to grow in size.

Jaime lets his head wander upwards for a moment, watching the boughs swing in the wind, listens to
the silent song of nature, one that he almost forgot about during his time at the capital, where he only
heard the sound of screams, behind closed doors and in green pyres, where everything was too loud,
too much, all too much for a soul to bear.

By contrast, everything around here is tranquil here, strangely peaceful, and that even though war
and death loom above the village the same way it hung heavy over King’s Landing or the Rock.
It seems to be a condition of the world at large and not the towns and villages in particular, for all it seems.

“So? What are we doing in the wood, wench? Because let me tell, you, taking me along may not be a smart move on your behalf. The clumsy Kingslayer I am, I may stumble and scare off, say, some animal you may want to hunt,” Jaime points out to her, turning his gaze back to the mannish woman who has him on a leash.

“Since I am looking for mushrooms and herbs, I tend to think that even if you were to fall down in your clumsiness, you would not scare them away,” Brienne points out to him.

“Mushrooms and herbs? What do you have that wicked herb lady for?” Jaime huffs. “The one that doesn’t seem to know how to make good green dye?”

“She doesn’t have the ones Maggy needs,” Brienne replies, her eyes already searching for the small plants.

“So you, the jarl’s daughter, do the errands for this wretched seer on top of the other tasks you load upon your broad shoulders?” Jaime snorts.

Oh, Father would not stop staring if he were to hear of such a thing!

A jarl, no matter how small his village, is supposed to concern himself with anything but the sheep. And same would be true for the jarl’s children. They should only look upon their sheep, knowing that they could rip it to shreds with their mighty claws and sharp teeth.

However, no one seems to have taught the wench that lesson, Jaime thinks to himself as they walk on. She keeps cloaking herself in sheep’s skin. And how foolish is that?

“A blind seer,” Brienne points out to him unwaveringly. “She’d have quite some trouble going here on her own, wouldn’t you agree?”

“What of that girl… Sassa, wasn’t it? She could do it all the same. I thought that this is what she is there for, actually,” Jaime huffs.

Just why do you keep acting like a peasant girl? You are a jarl’s daughter, by Odin’s beard. Start acting like that, or else it seems to be little wonder that even the herb ladies and lads think it is within their rights to disgrace you foolish thing.

“She does the errands around the house for Maggy, but Sassa still has a lot to learn when it comes to herbs and mushrooms. Maggy will know most by the smell and texture, but some you can only keep apart by their looks. It’s safer if I gather them and show them to Sassa so that she can learn what they look like for the future,” Brienne explains simply. “And I take her along every once in a while to teach her where to find them, too. It’s just a matter of time until Sassa will be able to do it on her own.”

Brienne still holds some tender memories of walking with the blind woman through the woods when she was only just a girl, scared of the new place now supposed to be her home after what seemed to be an endless voyage at sea. Maggy made her learn the names of all herbs, mushrooms, and plants, the shrubs, the trees, not just by the looks but also the sounds, the smells. The seer explained to her what they were good for. She taught her what harm they could do. And in that way, Maggy showed young Brienne this place upon which they built their village.

She showed Brienne her home by a time she didn’t know how she could ever consider it such because her childish mind kept going back to painted glass at Evenfall Hall, to the sapphire blue.
waters of an isle devoured by green.

Thanks to Maggy, Brienne got into touch with this place, learned about its merits, the things it had to give when Brienne thought it was a burden, a curse.

Thanks to Maggy, she learned to appreciate this earth, this soil, she learned to see it, through the blind woman’s eyes.

Thanks to Maggy, Brienne learned to regard this place as her new home.

Thanks to Maggy, this place became home.

Thanks to Maggy, Brienne began to see.

And Brienne wants to share that gift with others, wants them to see through her eyes what she had to realize through blind eyes first.

But the Kingslayer would never understand, how would he?

“You have to learn how to be a jarl’s daughter, and I tell you that as someone who took quite some time to learn how to be a jarl’s son,” Jaime tells her, pulling Brienne out of her memories, back to the Kingslayer trotting after her. “You should take it from me, because I know what I am talking about, wench.”

“I am not taking advices from the likes of you,” she snaps, her eyes turning to slits for a second or two.

The Kingslayer scoffs. “There are no men like me, only me.”

She rolls her eyes at him. “If you want to keep believing that.”

“Well, as far as I am concerned, the mere fact that I am the only one in all of Westeros known as the Kingslayer gives weight to the idea that I am indeed unique in that way,” he quips, puckering his lips, not quite sure why he argues in favor of a name he learned to despise so much.

This place makes me mad and I have to get away from here, that’s it! That has to be it!

“Well, it’s hard to reenact that after the King is dead, at your hands,” Brienne huffs, looking around for the plants Maggy asked her to gather, for her to make tinctures and creams with.

“There is always a new king, even if it’s just a fat jarl now sitting in King’s Landing,” Jaime replies with a huff. “Not a better one, but another, and another, and another.”

It just goes on and on and on.

The wheel keeps turning, no matter how it spins in all the wrong directions.

Just like Ragnarök, the world will keep repeating its own mistakes. It will outdo itself in all the bad it brings forth, compared to the little light it can shed in a place that is filled with murder, plunder, and green liquid that can set a city aflame. And all that only just because a King believed himself to be a dragon sleeping under the rock of the Red Keep, ready to awaken, ready to be reborn, to become the sea serpent set on fire meant to bring forth the end of all days.

But I put an end to that cycle, Jaime ponders, blinking as his eyes drift to the canopy. I stopped it. That one thing, it came to an end, and it won’t come back. That serpent will remain in the deep sea of his own bad blood, hopefully for all Ragnaröks still to come. And if not… well, I know how to
swing my sword, and if it is going through his belly next time, so it will. I will just keep killing destiny until it stop screaming “burn them all!”

“Would you mean to kill that king, too, then?” Brienne questions, making her discontent no secret. Though that is little surprising to Jaime.

“Robert? How daring would it be to kill my own brother in law,” Jaime huffs, a bit amused, a bit bitter. “I prepared the seat for him, kept it warm, and he took it. I suppose Robert is punished enough with having to fit into that rather tight, uncomfortable chair despite the fact that he wants to do nothing but whore around and eat as much as he can until he is as fat as a boar. Needless to mention that there is little love between him and my dear sister. Thus, I suppose, in some twisted way, it was a choice for the better that I left that uncomfortable chair to him to keep and sit upon with his fat ass. So, why would I bother putting him off of it again?”

The only reason would be green fire, would be echoes of “burn them all” ringing through the Red Keep, but thankfully, Robert Baratheon has not the temperament for it.

He is too lazy for that.

Brienne bends down to cut a mushroom off its root with a fast flick of her knife, which shines like a white sliver in the light breaking through the canopy. “In any case, you are by far not as unique as you take yourself to be, Kingslayer. You may have done something singular, something that likely no one else will dare or want to repeat, but that doesn’t make you unique in character.”

“You can consider yourself fortunate that you are far too uninteresting for me to bother to care about you trying to hurt my feelings, wench,” Jaime huffs, watching Brienne as she stuffs the mushrooms into her leather pouch.

“Oh, I rejoice every day that I am so boring to the Kingslayer that he cannot even bother to feel the cut of my slights,” Brienne snarls, rolling her eyes as she pushes back on her heels to start to walk again.

“Just what have I done to you as of late that you hate me even more than you do by nature?” Jaime snaps as she pulls him after her.

They are natural enemies, he is aware. However, for a time Jaime thought that the wench didn’t curse him as much anymore, was aiming at a strange kind of truce. Yet, all of that changed when her face shifted back to how they got to know one another, the same expression of misgiving, the same expression of hatred flaring up in her deep blue orbs. There was war in those eyes, not peace.

Not that Jaime cares, of course, but it leaves him wondering. He likes to know what crimes he is found guilty of without proper trial. Jaime is used to that in years, but that does not mean he does not have interest in what ways the people think of him as a monster. There are just so many perspectives, so many angles that he lost count of them. It only ever left him wondering some many times what his actual shape is, what his true monstrosity, residing deep in his black heart, actually looks like.

Though until now, no one could give him a proper answer. And Jaime reckons that won’t change any time soon. People are far too busy whispering behind his back, after all.

“What haven’t you done already that would have me act to you any differently, you tell me?” Brienne retorts through pursed lips. “As far as I recall, you tried to kill me unsuccessfully on a number of occasions.”

“And as I told you often enough, that is not directed against you personally,” Jaime sighs.
Can’t you get the difference, wench? Just because I have no trouble moving through you to get away doesn’t mean I bear you a grudge. You just happen to be in my way of getting back to my people, my family. And if you were honest with yourself, woman, you would have to admit that you wouldn’t do it any other way.

But that is too uncomfortable for many to face. We do a lot of dishonorable things for the people we forgo all oaths and promises for. Because family comes first, will always come first. The blood that runs between your kin is of the texture that holds the strongest promises, even those unspoken.

“Taking someone’s life is… rather personal to the person whose life you mean to take,” she scoffs, shaking her head.

And it is personal to those who loved that person and will miss him or her being gone. The lives of the men they lost to the Boltonmen are personal losses to Brienne, but it seems that the likes of the Kingslayer don’t understand such a notion, such a feeling. Jaime didn’t even seem to care about his own men being killed when he was brought to their village.

*Perhaps the others are right when they say that such a man cannot be trusted. Someone who has nothing to lose is a very dangerous kind of man.*

“True enough, but that doesn’t mean I hate you or anyone else in your precious little village. It’s just that I care more about others than I care about you. And be truthful to yourself, wench, you are no different in that regard. Or would you weep for me more than you would for your own people?” he points out to her. She looks over her shoulder once, her face stoic.

“I would not shed a tear,” Brienne announces, busying herself with picking up some blades of grass growing near an oak tree to add to the collection of herbs meaning home.

Jaime laughs at that, still rather amused at her straightforwardness. “That’s what I thought. Because that is *natural*. We care most about our families, our people, not those of others. We are all beasts in the end, roaming the face of the earth. Charity is for the weak who get devoured.”

“It must be a comforting thought,” she sighs, her feet brushing over dry leaves as she starts moving again.

The corners of Jaime’s mouth pull into a frown. “What?”

“To simply find a reason not to care about anyone else but yourself,” Brienne replies, rolling her broad shoulders. “I imagine it to be a great comfort, a way to absolve yourself.”

“Oh, wench, you would never know what you are saying,” Jaime retorts.

*I cared. Gods know I cared, if only they will ever know, but I did. I cared for half a million people more than myself, more than my oaths, my king, my family, my people. I cared about so many people not my people, cared about them so much that you will never even begin to grasp it, wench. And see where it got me, getting lectured by the likes of you!*

He is aware that Brienne cannot know, but it doesn’t keep the sting out of his flesh, the cutting edge of that untruth. Jaime wished he didn’t care, he wished he could just brush it off like he ignores the scratches, bruises, scars, the comments, whispers, or silent laughter. That would have made things far easier. Jaime saw it with his fellows who walked out unscathed, with their honor intact. He wished he never cared about the people at the capital, but he did, he still does, though no one will ever know.

*And that is the kind of thing that only I can shoulder. But you, wench? You shoulder yourself with*
such unnecessary, petty things, collecting mushrooms instead of having the girl do it for you, letting the lads laugh at your stature, let the herb ladies scold you even though she should know that she is speaking to a jarl’s daughter. And you think you get to lecture me? You don’t even begin to grasp what it means to shoulder true responsibility, what it means to carry truths that you cannot let down because no one may know, because no one must know or else they would all burn, burn, burn.

“But let me guess – you don’t care to revise my opinion so I may know what I am saying?” Brienne snorts.

He won’t let her in on anything but expects her to have a better opinion based on what? The actions the Kingslayer claims to have undertaken? Brienne can only tell what Jaime did. He slew a king, betrayed the oath he took. She can say that he tried to kill her to run away, even though the althing is not that far away that it would require him much effort to simply wait until it takes place to gain his freedom again.

Why would Brienne bother to trust this man if Jaime gave her not a single reason beyond having had the piety to stay the night she wove the blood of her people into the cloth now hanging in the common hall to honor the fallen?

Is Brienne supposed to have faith in the Kingslayer for that one time he caught her when she blacked out for a moment after he almost managed to kill her to get away?

Is she supposed to trust him for a reflex? A pang of piety that seems to reside even in the likes of the Kingslayer?

Jaime gave Brienne far more reason not to trust him. And you need trust to have a truce. So how is she supposed to do that if he doesn’t give the reason? So long Jaime does not, Brienne knows better than to put faith in a man who doesn’t care for honor, doesn’t care for promises and oaths. The others must be right… right?

If only the oaks and the willows would whisper the answers to her most pressing questions, hidden away in the winds rustling through their leaves.

“You seem to get an understanding of your captive after all, wench,” Jaime huffs.

She snorts. “Just that I don’t care about getting an understanding of my captive.”

It’s a lost cause anyway, Brienne only ever adds to herself.

“That’s what I thought.”

And she is not alone in that, Jaime is aware.

No one cares. No one. Absolutely no one.

The seer from Casterly Rock shall be damned for all eternities for putting those ideas inside Jaime’s head, about not being alone, about what he is meant to do, and how it wouldn’t be him alone in all this. The seer was wrong, told him the same sweet lies he whispered to his father, which Tywin Lannister knew how to spin into another cloth into which lies are woven over and over until they sound like truth, feel like it, even. And Jaime is now supposed to keep weaving that same cloth, that same web of lies to somehow maintain a picture of the world his father created in thin air.

But the seer was wrong, was full of lies. The threads are all brittle.
We come into this world alone, we leave it alone. Safe for the family, we walk this wretched earth by ourselves.

Jaime slew the King alone, and apparently, the seer did not foresee that, no matter how deep he looked into the flames.

If a blind seer knows more than he does, how much good can he be?

The two continue walking, stopping here and there, whenever Brienne catches sight of some plant she deems useful. Jaime kicks at the dry leaves, waiting, boring himself and her with his questions about what that plant is, what this mushroom is good for, which is poisonous, which makes you sick, which healthy, just to keep asking, just to keep reminding her of his presence.

However, to Jaime’s utter surprise, Brienne answers every time he asks.

“This one can be made into an ointment to battle gangrene.”

“That herb, when chewed, helps against tooth ache.”

“These berries will have you not leave the privy any time soon.”

“Those can knock a bear out if eaten raw.”

“One nasty rash they will give you, I assure you.”

“The lads like to chew those mushrooms to lead their mind astray.”

“Those help stop bleedings.”

“They just taste good.”

For a woman who does not give away the reason for her father’s absence despite the fact that Jaime can’t do anything with that knowledge, the wench is surprisingly open about teaching him those things. And that has Jaime wonder for a moment just why Brienne would bother.

But he abandons the thought quickly when the wench tugs on his leash again, reminding him that she, indeed, does not care past a certain point. She probably just answers his questions to pass the time or keep him occupied with that to make him taunt her less.

And that is when he catches something that has the song of his home ring in his ears ever the louder, Tyrion’s voice over a goblet of wine, maps scattered across his study, Casterly Rock shining like a ruby in the first rays of sunshine announcing a new morning.

This has to end, and it has to end right now.

He needs another song, not the tranquil tale of a people not his. Or else, this wretched world will keep being utterly unbearable.

Brienne turns her head when she feels a tug on the leash. She whirls around to see the Kingslayer on the ground, face first in the dry leaves. The man groans loudly, some of the dry leaves blowing up in the air as he exhales sharply.

“Well, you did warn me that you are rather clumsy,” Brienne grunts as she walks back, making sure not to pick him up from the front, knowing that last time by the well, such approach almost cost her her life.
Brienne swings her legs over his back and pulls him up by the collar.

“Move,” she curses, giving him a shove forward, which has him groan out loud, “Ow, wench, I may have broken something. Be gentle with your valuable prisoner, hm?”

“On dry leaves? If so, you are too fragile to ever have been a man of the Kingsguard,” Brienne scoffs with frustration heavy in her voice.

Even that the Kingslayer manages to destroy for her, turn bitter, when it used to be so sweet on her tongue as Brienne inhaled the scents of the woods now her home.

*I should have left him in the bloody pen for good.*

Because she can’t afford to lose this home a second time, can’t afford to forget its taste, its sounds. This is the only home she will have, because Tarth is gone, far out of her reach. But this place is right within her grasp, right there in every root, herb, and mushroom.

*And the Kingslayer won’t get to take that away from me.*

“Oh, I was a member of that guard. Kept the King’s council, kept his secrets. Many secrets. Way too many. I fought for him until I shoved a sword through his back. And trust me in this, wench: For that, you have to be made of *quite* tough stuff,” he tells her, some leaves still in his hair, dirt at his chin that neither one bothers removing.

“And now you fall like a leaf,” she sighs, resuming her position ahead of him, her eyes returning to the earth in search for berries, mushrooms, and herbs. “And leaves break easily, you know?”

“Not all can fall with the grace of a gigantic stone like you, wench,” Jaime snorts.

“Oh, you wound me so, Kingslayer, you’d have no idea,” Brienne retorts, calling over her shoulder.

She has been called far worse throughout her life. Brienne knows she is considered a great lumbering beast by most men and women who never bothered to get to know her any better. And of those there are few who actually got to know her.

“Isn’t that my one reason of existence here?” he sighs.

And truth be told, Jaime is tired of his existence being limited to such tiny things, small pebbles lying on the earth when he used to move mountains at King’s Landing. Sick and tired he is, of having to make himself that small and carrying out those deeds he would rather do without.

*And all that thanks to Father’s pride*, Jaime thinks to himself. *All of that thanks to his damned wish to never take help from anyone, to have people see nothing but the strong image of what our clan actually, deep down, is not.*

And yet he went, and yet he took his men on this senseless voyage.

*The things we do for love.*

The things you do for your people.

The things you do for the family.

*Or rather, the things you do for the family’s name.*

“Well, if you wish to make your existence such,” Brienne huffs, “I can’t prevent you from it.”
They carry on walking wordlessly, the only sound they make being those of the rustling, dry leaves they push aside with their boots.

Brienne tries to keep her focus on the usual tasks, tries to ease back into her routines after the chaos that horrific night came with – ever the more so since a meeting held in the common hall shortly after the ambush.

The older men were quite outspoken about revenge. And of course, the youths were quick to join the chorus the elders sung, not knowing the actual song of blood, too young to remember what it was like to be on the run from Tarth after the Tragedy happened. They listen by far too much to their father’s stories, their father’s calls for revenge, for bad blood long since dried in the sand, washed away by the tide.

Though her father did not forget, watched the blood dry, watched it being carried away like his one son, watched the blood being devoured by the waves the same way the sea swallowed Galladon whole. And the jarl will not have that repeat itself ever again, that much is for sure.

The karls wanted to hunt down the Boltonmen, kill as many as they could, to take lives for those they ripped out of their home, cut out with their oh so sharp blades.

“We stood down far too long, I say! We have to stand up for our people at last! We have to induce fear again! We have run long enough!” one of the older warriors who lost all of his family safe for his youngest son and daughter in the ambush back on the Sapphire Isle.

Brienne’s father said to them what he always tells them when the waves keep rising again: that yes, they have run, but that they have arrived, too. He reminds them that this is their home, and that they should have learned from the tragedy that it’s ever the more important to protect the home they have, more so than it is to get revenge on those who tried to take it from them, who harmed them.

That in itself was all that Brienne expected of the meeting of karls, the jarl, and the common folk wishing to attend. It’s a song she knows since her father let her come along to listen, to learn. However, what had her eyes widen was when one of the men made a rather chilling suggestion she could not ignore:

“What if the Kingslayer landing here and the Boltonmen attacking us have to do with one another? Ever crossed your mind, my Jarl? What if the Lannisters and the Boltons work together, against us, against everyone? What if the Kingslayer was just the warning sign they sent us and we kept ignoring it?”

Truth be told, Brienne didn’t let the thought occur to her until the man spoke the words. Because she had the image of Jaime in her mind from when he kept a man company who was going to die, who pressed his chained hands against the wound of a man of a people not his. And for a time, Brienne wanted to believe in that image, she wanted to have faith in that much more than she would like to admit. However, ever since the idea became palpable that the Kingslayer, or at the least his family, may plot together against them, she found that image shattered into thousands of pieces scattered on forest ground, along the golden shining leaves.

So truly, how do you believe such a man? How do you trust a single word he speaks if he can lie without it showing on his face?

“I do hope that my reason to live will amount to more than being dragged along by a pig-headed stubborn, mannish woman standing as tall as a giant,” Jaime snorts as he keeps trotting after her, the mockery already in every of his steps.
“Well, you have the kingslaying on your side as well. So surely, you got some reasons, besides being on my leash. Whatever that may be,” Brienne retorts.

Jaime shakes his head, smirking to himself.

*If only you knew, wench, if only you knew…*

“Oh, maybe I will tell you once you behave yourself, wench,” he laughs drily.

Though that seems an unlikely scenario. In fact, befriending the mighty God of Thunder seems more likely than that occurrence. Jaime kept that from a whole city, the entire country in fact, so he can’t imagine that this woman will break open the seal he put over his lips so that no truths will seep out into the world.

*And the green flames stay where they belong: some place to be forgotten.*

She grimaces with irritation in her features. “I have to behave myself?”

“In case you never noticed, you can be quite rude to me,” Jaime comments.

“Oh, I did notice,” Brienne answers. “It may even have a certain reason that I am.”

Why would she act nicely to the man who tried to kill her? The man who has no trouble murdering her family, her people in cold blood if only to get away faster? Why would she be kind to a man who has no intention of keeping his oaths, of keeping true to his promises?

*Why would I be gentle to a man who may well have to do with the murder of my people because the man’s voice from the council may ring very true, that he is just another piece in the game Jarl Tywin wants to play.*

Jaime cocks an eyebrow at her, suggesting, “The reason being me?”

“You seem to have grasped the concept at last, Kingslayer,” Brienne tells him with a smile that doesn’t even come close to her eyes. “Took you long enough.”

“I am a slow learner after all,” Jaime laughs. “Though I will have to grant you that much, wench, that was almost funny.”

“Just that I don’t try to be,” Brienne sighs.

This may all be a joking matter to the likes of the Kingslayer, but it is not for Brienne, for her, it’s the tough, biting, gnarling, scratching reality that, truly, there is no one she care to have faith in outside her own clan, that her father was right on those accounts all along.

And something starts to whisper to her that he was right about some others as well, even though the young woman does her best not to let the thought travel deeper into the corners of her mind.

“You do a lousy job at it anyway, wench, fret not. Your sense of humor is as sour as is your grimace. You know, you could give me one last sweet smile, as far as that is possible with your homely face,” he suggests, smiling as broadly as he can, though he does not feel the same high he normally does when throwing insults her way.

Brienne shakes her head, her lips curling into a disappointed smirk. She seemingly let herself be fooled far too much by this man, and that even though she should know better, should long since have learned her lessons. Brienne knows she should do better than trusting easily, or at least daring to
put even a little faith, in the likes of the Kingslayer, someone know to betray, to break promises, stay away.

*He is a Lannister, after all. Jaime Tywinson.*

If what the karl during their *thing* said is true, this man will turn out much more wicked than she thought Jaime Lannister to be, and Brienne didn’t hold him in high spirit anyway, not after all the trouble Jaime already caused, not after the tall, dark tales she heard about the man known as the Kingslayer.

“Well, for what do I have you if not to humor me?” Brienne replies, her eyes searching for familiar herbs and mushrooms on the forest ground.

“Only the Gods will know for how much longer you have me to humor you,” Jaime answers, looking from left to right. “In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if you ended up missing me once I am gone.”

Brienne shakes her head. “Missing you? I dare to doubt that.”

*The day of the althing can’t come soon enough. And then I will be home again, without someone the likes of the Kingslayer trying to destroy what we were able to gather after all was taken away from us.*

She will gather it all back, Brienne promises to herself, she will gather it like the herbs and mushrooms, put it all back in place, and then, her normal little life will carry on the way it is destined to be, whatever that destiny may hold.

For only the Norns will foretell it.

“You say so now, wench. We will speak of the matter again when you lie on the furs all alone, stroking yourself while thinking about me, so to stop missing me,” Jaime snickers in his usual wicked way, bouncing in his step as far as his restraints allow. “Oh, I am sure you will miss me very much once I am gone. Just like you will come to regret that you never took me up on the offers I made so many times. Though I reckon you will moan those away then, too, while you ease out the *ache* for your precious little Kingslayer.”

“If you want to believe that,” Brienne huffs, making sure to keep her attention to the front, so not to leave him under the impression that his words get to her in any way.

*Because they clearly don’t.*

“It’s not about faith, woman, it’s just an observation,” Jaime argues, chuckling softly. “And little wonder, too. Why wouldn’t you want a bit of the Kingslayer?”

“Because you are… the Kingslayer?” Brienne answers.

What would she want with him of all people?

*And anyway, even if so, my choice seems to have been made already, which means that my wedding is only a matter of time, however much of a bad omen that will prove to be.*

Brienne shakes her head, focuses instead on herbs and mushrooms again, on her home, instead of distant futures of a time she does not want to come closer, which is why busying herself with all around their village seems far more soothing.
“But doesn’t that make the thrill of it? Don’t you like a challenge every now and then, too, wench? Think about it. Who can say of herself that she took the Kingslayer for herself? You could do yourself a great favor and simply… let go, right here, right now,” Jaime snickers, his voice trailing off. “Who knows, maybe you’d even come to enjoy it.”

“I think I will have to pass yet again,” Brienne sighs. “Most kind of you to offer, Kingslayer.”

“But wench, think of it, us two, alone in the woods. No one would even see us, let alone hear us. You could scream your heart out while I let you ride my cock like a mare in the heat. The place is perfect for the occasion, too. And then you would have something to remind yourself of me once I am gone back to the Rock and you miss me so dearly that your body is aching for me to return to you, though, of course, I won’t ever.”

“If I were you, Kingslayer, I would focus my efforts on making it to the **althing** in one piece, because then, you will be reunited with your family and will never have to bother with the likes of us again,” Brienne retorts.

It’s only a matter of time until he is gone, if all keep up the game for a while longer. Then Jaime will be handed over to his father and all will hopefully resolve itself without causing more of an uproar. Because her father reminded her yet again that this is exactly what they try to bypass these days. They don’t want attention, they don’t want to be cast in a different light than the one they shed on themselves.

*They wouldn’t listen anyway, to what we have to tell. They didn’t before, because we were a people without a home, without any power, so why would they suddenly start to listen now?*

“Oh, who knows, maybe I will end up thinking about you, too, every now and then, when I am lying in my bed, bored and maybe aching a bit, too. I mean, you *did* leave quite an impression, I will have to admit,” Jaime chuckles. “Though for you to leave a **lasting** impression, you may have to give it a bit more effort, you see?”

“Curiously, I don’t really care about leaving a **lasting impression**,” Brienne objects, making sure to keep her voice leveled.

She wants to forget and be forgotten, wants to return to where she once was, to where she wants to stay for the rest of her time, in that village, in their house upon the small hill, carrying water back and forth and listening to the fire cracking in the hearth. Because that is the blessing the Gods have given them, and Brienne knows better than to let pride take a hold of her.

*Pride made an evenstar fall from the sky once*, her father always told her ever since they were cast out of their home, swept away by the great wave of green flame. *And that will never repeat itself.*

However, such lessons are lost on someone like Jaime, Brienne is sure of it. The Lannisters swim in pride, and if rumors is to be believed, it is the only thing they have to hold on to.

*Because companionship and duty are surely not.*

“You should care about leaving an impression on me, though. Wouldn’t you want me to hold you in the best of memories?” Jaime argues. “Wench?”

“I don’t care for how you come to remember me,” Brienne scoffs. “I don’t care for how anyone remembers me.”

*Or talks or thinks or speaks or whispers. Words are wind. Wind rustling through leaves bound to fall for next autumn, next Winter.*
“That is a very curious thing to say,” Jaime replies, shaking his head. “Don’t we all try to work for our reputation, for our renown to be carried over to Valhalla? I seem to remember people talking about that a great deal.”

“Don’t you think it’s a very curious thing to say for the Kingslayer?” Brienne snaps.

“Oh, if there is a Great Hall by the end of all days, and Odin himself indeed sits at the far end of it to wait for the warriors to judge them all on whether they are allowed a seat amongst the best, I think he will know what to do with the likes of me. And it may be quite something else from what people want to believe,” Jaime tells her, more sincere than intended.

Not that he has any illusion that Brienne will understand it. After all, Jaime will take that with him to his grave, he is sure of it. And if there is something beyond the earth, as people say and pray, Odin will decide on whether the lives of hundreds and thousands of people is enough to pay the debt of the life of a madman who was crowned King of all jarls though he was always undeserving of the title. In fact, Jaime can’t seem to wait for that judgment to finally be passed, but that will be by a power beyond that of those whispering behind his back.

And even beyond the mannish jarl’s daughter who thinks she knows all about honor when she never had to see it being called into question, twisted, suffocated, burned with green flame, buried under the screams of those who dared object.

“So you don’t believe in it, Valhall I mean?” Brienne asks, her lips curling into a frown.

“I dare to have my doubts,” Jaime answers. “Let’s put it like that.”

“Now, that’s a curious thing to say for people of our kind,” Brienne argues, her eyebrows furrowing as she busies herself with plants she seeks to find, though suddenly they feel much more unfamiliar.

“Well, I didn’t have the luxury of a seer who can actually see into the future in contrast to yours,” Jaime tells her. “Our seer is more of a schemer.”

“And just because of one seer you lose faith in the Gods entirely?” Brienne questions. “Then I daresay it can’t be a deeply felt belief after all.”

“No, because of one King I lost faith in the Gods entirely,” Jaime answers, no hint of a lie in his voice. “That was enough.”

Because that is all that it takes.

That is all that it takes to make a young man’s bright eyes go dark with regret.

That is all it takes to sew a young fighter’s lips shut as he watches on as people cook in their armors, as their skins turn to wax, only to melt away.

That is all it takes to make you doubt the goodness in the world.

It makes you doubt the jarls, the karls, those perceived as heroes and those defamed as the villains for all time.

It makes you doubt yourself as much as it makes you doubt the Allfather and all of his people said to reside in the rich palaces of Asgard, because when you called, screamed, in your dreams as well as wide awake, standing vigil while the King did as he pleased, the Gods did not listen.

They sent no sign.
The only sign that came was war, was the Rebellion, but Jaime cannot believe that it was the Gods’ doing. It was owed to Robert’s rage and Eddard’s fragile sense of honor.

So if the Gods are that powerful, if the Gods are that just, then how did they let such injustice happen for such a long time?

What is the wisdom the Allfather sought in watching that play out, cook in armors, turn to ash?

And how can someone genuinely keep praying to him, to the whole of the pantheon, if you have seen the failure of the world, smelled it, heard it scream and then fall silent?

Jaime found he could not, and so he dares to have his doubts, believes in himself instead, in the family, those who stayed with him when times were hard and cold and deafeningly silent safe for the whispers behind his back.

“Apologies if I insulted your deeply-held faith, wench. It would never cross my mind to keep you from being as dutiful as ever. But the likes of me, the Kingslayers roaming this earth, we have a tendency to question authorities. Pay no mind to it,” Jaime adds after a long moment of silence, though it is only ever met by more silence by the woman ahead of him.

Brienne just goes on walking as her eyes look for familiarity in the woods, search for something that is inherent only to this home, not the one she had to abandon back on Tarth. Because, truth be told, for her, it as one gigantic flame that made her question her faith for a long time, too. She couldn’t fathom why the Gods would hate them so to destroy Tarth to the point that life became impossible on its soil. A young girl who had just lost almost all she ever held dear and saw the others around her suffer a similar kind of destiny, if not a worse one, Brienne prayed to the Gods for answers. She asked them what they did wrong, what she did that they punished all those people. She begged them to answer her calls to, at the very least, explain it to her, send her an image, something anything. Night and day, gazing at her own ugly reflection while stuck on a boat going nowhere until they found dry land no one wrestled away from her people, she prayed, she begged, and bit back the tears when only the oars made sound, when only the cries of the women, children, and men filled the silence of the sea.

And when they found their new home in these stranger lands no one meant to take away from them again after they laid claim to the fjord and the hills beyond, Brienne stopped praying to the Gods entirely for a while. The questions of why Frigg, Odin, Thor, and all the Æsir would let that happen to them even though she could not find it in her mind what great wrong they had done to deserve such destiny, such hardship, faded. Brienne started to hate the Gods, even. She hated them for the tears of her people, for the many graves they could not dig because there was nothing to bury. She hated them for Galladon who was taken by the sea. She hated them for her father’s stony expression and the soft sniffles coming from his bedroll late at night, when the jarl thought that she would not hear his whimpers during a time when there was no sure way to know whether they would make it to the next season without starving to death.

However, she found her faith again, and Brienne dares to believe that it was the Gods giving her a sign when that strange old woman came to their town. Young Brienne ran into Maggy the Frog first as she had roamed the woods, cursing the Gods. The first time Maggy cackled, Brienne was in a fright and was just about to run away, but the old woman posed no threat, instead only ever asked to be brought to that “new kingdom that grew out of barren rock” to talk to its “lord.” Back then, Brienne was in deep shock that the woman even called it “new kingdom,” because it was just a plain village with provisional houses that lacked warmth and comfort.

When Maggy was accepted into the clan as she proved not only her worth as a healer but also as the seer they didn’t know they were looking for until she announced that it was her task to do, Brienne
kept her distance at first. She didn’t want anything to do with the Gods, and a woman who spoke to them only ever brought back bad blood for Brienne. But the old woman had her come over to her house time and time again, to help here, help her there, and soon she could no longer deny herself that she enjoyed the seer’s company. Brienne liked the attention, she will admit. And she fell in love with Maggy’s stories, the tall tales of the Gods.

And just as they passed through those parts of the woods she and Jaime now walk through, in search for ingredients for another balm, another ointment, Maggy told her not a heroic tale of the mighty Thor, but instead spoke of sacrifice, spoke of loss, and how sacrifice has to be made for life to be born.

“For the world to be born, to be breathed into existence, my dear child, the giant Ymir had to be slain by his own kin. And it was from his parts, from his body, his flesh and bone, that the world gained shaped. His flesh became the earth underneath our feet and his skull became our sky. And who would deny the glory of that sacrifice, after he saw all stars shine in the darkness of the night’s sky, saw the moon kissing the earth with the gentleness only a mother can express, hm?” was what Maggy told her, and while young Brienne was caught off-guard by that proposal, even more so because she kept her struggle with their faith guarded from view, though Brienne should have known that she could not keep it from Maggy since she did not need her eyes to see.

“But maybe the world would have been just fine as it was, before Ymir was slain by his children who became the Gods,” Brienne pointed out solemnly back that decisive day.

“Oh child, we would never know the glory of such realm, for we weren’t there to see it, but the world’s course is forward, the trees grow up, and that even though they may be cut down. And even if they are, they will grow upward the next morning.”

“And what does that have to do with the Gods? Isn’t it cruel of them to let that happen to their creation?”

“A perfect world is one where nothing grows, child. Because all is there already, and stays for all time. Our world is very much in change, still, very much in growth. It’s no more than a bud sprung from the earth that once was the great giant who gave life with his death,” Maggy told her. “Sometimes something has to die for something greater to be born, to have a chance at growing higher than what used to be there before.”

“And how do we know that we don’t yet stand still, how do we know that it is all worth the sacrifice?”

“You will see once you do, child. Because growth is the one thing you can’t stop, growth is the one thing even the Gods can’t keep from happening.”

And the seer was proven right when Brienne went up to their field further up the hill early in the morning when the entire town was still fast asleep and the stars were still gleaming in the brightening sky that used to be a skull.

Because that was when she saw.

That was when she saw the first yield of their sacrifice, gleaming in the dark earth like emeralds, budding, growing, climbing into the sky no matter how tough the struggle. And in due time, it was from those yields that they could provide for their people and hunger retreated to the realm of memories.

That was when Brienne stopped questioning the Gods’ will for most of it, wanting to believe that
they had greater plans in mind, and that their sacrifices had to be made to make this place grow, to make it their little kingdom indeed.

She has to believe that, or else, Brienne is afraid, she may fall back into despair.

“Oomph!” she can hear Jaime call out from behind. Brienne whirls around to see Jaime yet again lying on the ground, face-down in the dry leaves and dirt, and that reminds her that she would do better than walking through her memories.

Because she apparently has to watch the Kingslayer’s feet move forward, too, until he is returned to his people, his kin.

“Again?!?” she calls out in exasperation, quick in her steps to walk back over to the man lying in the dirt and dry leaves. “You are quite clumsy for a lion, and that even though…”

She doesn’t get to finish the thought as something collides with the side of her head and Brienne can hear all but a loud bell ringing so loud in her skull that she is afraid the sky will fall upon her. The shieldmaiden coils backwards and falls onto the dry leaves, which fly high in the air, only to reveal the Kingslayer approaching her with fast strides, his features a grim, dark grimace, just like back by the well.

*Because some things just don’t grow.*

Brienne pulls on the leash to try to throw him off balance, even though her head his pounding from the impact of what turns out to be a stone Jaime must have picked up when he fell down, but to her great shock, the man seems to have cut through the rope with it, too.

*He fell down on purpose to gather that stone to cut through the rope,* Brienne thinks to herself as realization dawns on her.

She means to grab her axe, but that is when Jaime is already on top of her, pinning her arms down with his legs, because his wrists are still wrapped in chains.

“You bastard,” she snarls.

“I told you often enough that I would use any chance I get to flee, so you shouldn’t be surprised,” Jaime says through gritted teeth, trying his best to keep her down, because even now the woman can put up a fight that he may well end up losing if he doesn’t watch it.

And Jaime can’t afford to lose now. He can’t wait for the people of this village to change their mind on whether to keep him alive or leave him a cripple or what not before they drag him to the *althing* to return whatever will be left of him to his father. Or whether they will reconsider and just bury him in a shallow grave to pretend that he has never been there.

Jaime has no reason to trust those people the same way they have no reason to trust him.

*That is just the way the world goes,* Jaime reassures himself. *Every man for himself.*

Brienne opens her mouth to shout out, but the Kingslayer is fast enough to cover her lips with his chained wrists.

“Stop it, wench. No one is going to hear you in time to take me captive again,” he tells her, looking the woman deep in the eye as he speaks.

“Now, listen, *listen!*” Jaime curses when Brienne tries to kick him off by using her long legs as
leverage. “I will remove my hands now and you will keep quiet or we will repeat this over and over until you do, understood?”

Brienne just glowers at him, her bright blue eyes piercing right through him with a force surpassing that of most daggers Jaime ever felt dig into his skin. The older man swallows as he slowly pries his hands away. Brienne lies still underneath him, though her flat chest keeps heaving so that he finds himself rising and falling with her upon every sharp intake of air.

“Good. So now, you listen to me, because I need you to understand that. I meant it and I still mean it now: I don’t want to do you more harm than is necessary. Don’t give me a reason to kill you, then I won’t have to,” Jaime says, keeping his eyes on her at all times. “But I will if I must.”

“Tells me the man who just hit me with a stone!” Brienne hisses though gritted teeth. “Like a dirty, little coward.”

“I do what is necessary to get back to my people. As anyone should,” Jaime insists. “As anyone would.”

“At the risk of betraying your own promises,” Brienne retorts. “Staining your own honor, if you ever possessed it.”

“Wench, how foolish can you be to have faith in an oathbreaker, a backstabber, the likes of me, hm?” Jaime huffs, unable to tear his gaze away from hers, because he hates the judgment in those blue orbs. “What were you thinking?”

“True enough. I knew all along that you are a traitor, but I didn’t take you to be so craven,” Brienne replies, her legs kicking out time and time again as she tries to put him off-balance.

Jaime looks at her in bewilderment for a moment, but then flashes a sad kind of smile that has Brienne shiver. “Craven you say? If that is what you think of me, then why would you still have some faith in me left? Don’t you know that the ones who are craven always run the fastest?”

“I didn’t have faith in you, but I dared to hope that you could learn,” Brienne snarls.

Grow.

Jaime scoffs at that. “Learn what? To be a good, obedient prisoner?”

That is what I was in the Red Keep, locked inside its walls without a lock on the door. And I won’t ever be one again, Jaime thinks to himself as he presses down on her even harder. He lost too much to it, to this prison that didn’t have him in visible chains but nonetheless unmoving, and Jaime can’t afford to lose more of himself, or else nothing of the man he once was will remain.

And that is all he has left, the bit of former glory, untainted by echoes of “burn them all” in his ears, of stained white, and the smell of burned, melting flesh.

And she can’t have that of him.

He can’t give it to her or anyone else.

He can’t, he simply can’t.

“To stop being a prisoner to your own dishonor by being more of a good man, a good warrior, an honorable son of a jarl deserving the red he wears. By being more than you are. But I was mistaken to believe that you could ever do that,” she spats. “Kingslayer.”
And this time, the name truly stings, Jaime has to realize, though he tries his best to push that thought away, to push it all away.

*It doesn’t matter, not at all. It’s just a name, I heard it too many times by now, it does not hurt me, doesn’t cut me. The lion does not concern himself with the opinion of the sheep.*

“Quite daring of you to say so in such a *delicate* position, wench,” Jaime taunts, pressing his pelvis more firmly against her for emphasis, giving her the most sinister look he can muster. “You do realize that you are at my will now, hm?”

It’s time to give it a show, it seems. Because Jaime has to make sure she won’t come after him, won’t chase him down, or else he cannot guarantee for anything. Because it’s his family he needs to return to, his people he needs to save, and as a prisoner in chains, Jaime can’t do either of those things.

*It has to end and it ends today.*

Brienne cranes her neck, if only to bring her eyes even more threateningly close to his. “I am at my own will. If I taunt, I do so on my own. You said it yourself, Kingslayer, you don’t care enough to kill me. So keep your sharp tongue inside your mouth. We both know that no taunt could make you want to kill me, rape me, whatever it may be that you try to make me scared of. You are a man without honor, Kingslayer, but I know you a bit by now, and that just isn’t who you are, no matter how much you try to pretend to be, no matter how much you may want to make yourself believe it to be true.”

“You don’t know me. You don’t know anything,” Jaime mutters, his breath hitched, his jaws clenched.

“If you want to kill me, then do it, but don’t wait for me to submit, for I will not,” Brienne replies. “Do it.”

“You shouldn’t dare me,” Jaime warns her.

“And yet I do,” Brienne hisses. “Because I am not afraid of you, won’t ever be. You are a lion without claws, without teeth. It seems you lost them once you became the Kingslayer and dug them into the Mad King.”

Jaime has a comment on the tip of his tongue when suddenly, familiar noises cut through the woods, past dry leaves, carried by the wind.

“Your reinforcement, Kingslayer?” Brienne snarls.

*The karp was seemingly right after all.*

And she should have known better.

“I have no reinforcement, what are you talking about?” Jaime argues, craning his neck to see just who may be approaching. “I thought that’s your people coming.”

“Certainly not. I could tell it by the sound,” Brienne answers, through pursed lips. “Perhaps it’s *your* friends, though. The Boltons, hm?”

Jaime looks at her with what Brienne thinks is genuine bewilderment. “I am no friends with those wretched butchers and I want no business with them whatsoever.”

Brienne is surprised when he stands up, releasing her from his grip at once. Jaime licks his lips as
Brienne scrambles to her feet, staggering for a moment as vertigo takes over for a second, but she is quick to gather herself.

“You should run back to your village to gather the warriors. If you hurry, you and your men can cut them off before they come down the hill,” he says, his eyes trained on the woods ahead from where the noises are growing louder by the second. In his periphery, Jaime can see Brienne straightening herself up, wiping the back of her hand against her forehead to wipe some of the blood dribbling down the side of her face away.

The blond man is surprised when Brienne wordlessly moves the opposite direction for a few steps, to come to stand before him, spreading her long legs, taking position… to fight!

“Wench, did you hear a word I just said?” Jaime barks, looking around nervously. He should long since be running, he knows, and yet, his feet remain unmoving right at this moment. Though it is possibly just a bit of regret for hitting her that hard to seemingly make her consider such folly.

“By the time I reach the village to alarm my people, they will long since have invaded the town,” Brienne replies curtly, not even looking in his direction as she draws her dagger from her belt.

They will defile their village, her home, will stomp on what grew in the cracks of the lands no one came looking for.

But her small kingdom will not fall, won’t be swept up by the jetty only to leave smears of blood there without a chance to keep it from happening.

“You have no shield, no good axe. You have what? That dagger and what else? Be reasonable and make a run for it while you still can, wench,” Jaime urges her. “Don’t be a fool!”

Maybe I hit her too hard in the head after all because the woman seems to have lost her godforsaken mind!

“Follow your own advices, Kingslayer. Go, run, run as far as your feet may carry you. This is not your battle to fight but mine,” Brienne tells him. “I have no use for cowards.”

Sometimes sacrifices have to be made for things to keep growing.

“You will die. That’s at least ten from the sounds of it,” Jaime urges her, though he keeps asking himself why he would, why he apparently does. She is the enemy. They are all his enemies. He should be running, he should try to get back home, and yet, his feet won’t move, and yet, he finds himself shouting out to her.

“What’s it to you?” Brienne asks, not bothering to reward him with her glance.

What is it to me indeed? Jaime thinks to himself, blinking. Why should I care?

Jaime is ripped out of his thoughts when Brienne whistles loudly, the sound echoing amongst the trees softly murmuring in the breeze.

“You should run,” Jaime urges her another time.

“As should you, since that is what you wanted all along, Kingslayer. But I am sworn to protect my people,” Brienne tells him, twisting the dagger in her hand. “And I keep my promises.”

Jaime lets out a shaky breath before turning away and starting in Western direction, from where he came and got dragged to this village making him go mad to the point that he gives out advices to the
enemy and almost forgot that his colors are crimson and gold.

*Home, I am going home.*

And once he made it back to the Rock, Jaime will tell his father just what nonsense all of this was, but he will do so, knowing Tyrion safe, knowing that the Boltons are not heading to their shores as well. How would he know if he were to stay in this wretched place, far too far away from his own home to be sure that no harm came to his people during his absence?

A sliver of blackness cuts past his left as Jaime proceeds through the darker parts of the woods, careful to keep off the usual tracks. The blond man snaps his head around to see familiar golden eyes gleaming at him for a moment, as though movement stopped for a small fraction of time. The direwolf Brienne uses all the while to threaten him with, it turns out, but the animal does not stop too long, ignores him instead, runs ahead, runs back to its master likely in dire need of the beast’s assistance.

Because that beast, too, seemingly has no use for its claws on someone cravenly running off.

Jaime looks back towards the clearing ahead of him. If he remembers correctly, further down west of the hill, on the other side of the fjord, there should also be access to the deeper waters. If need be, Jaime might just as well make himself a boat out of some logs or what not, if only to get home before the town’s people can think better of having him killed. For all that Brienne just said, it may have been for the best that he went while he still could. If they believe that he and his family are on the same side as the Boltons, Jaime’s stay in the small village would have proven not just to be unpleasant but also lethal. The men may begrudgingly accept a jarl’s rule, but if there is what they see as a traitor who helped in some heinous crime as the ambush was, then it would have only been a matter of time until one of the men had managed to sneak into the pit or the wench’s bedchamber to open his throat before he could make a single sound of protest.

Mistrust is a weapon that can cut even swifter than the finest blade.

It is for the best that he goes, truly. Jaime knows it, he knows it for certain. It will spare them all a lot of conflict, a lot of pain. Gods know what his father would do with them, were he to know under just what conditions they kept his oldest son. Tywin Lannister has made drastic choices for far less, like hurt pride, for instance.

*It is for the best. It’s easiest now.*

Brienne is a good fighter, without a doubt. She could stand her ground against the young shieldmaidens all by herself, too. And she has her wolves, which, of that he is sure, are eager to protect their master to death and beyond.

There is a crunch and then white hot pain exploding in Jaime’s knee as he crashes to the ground, whirling some dry leaves high up in the air. The oldest Lannister son winces as he rubs against the side of his knee, his finger shaking, his breath hitched, sure of the bruise about to form.

It must be a wink of fate that he now stumbles, instead of just pretending to do so in order to slip away. And he almost feels like laughing out loud.

*The Gods must have their dear fun meddling in my affairs.*

Jaime runs the flat of his palms down his body to brush off dirt and dry leaves sticking to his clothes, but his finger come to a halt when they feel red. His fingertips curl around the crimson fabric of the tunic Brienne gave him the night the men were slaughtered, smoothes over the small bumps of
where the uneven threads were woven into one piece of cloth.

If the wench was sincere, and that is actually something Jaime has absolute faith in, considering the circumstance of the gift, she gave it to him believing in his good intentions, gave it to him to show a growing kind of faith in him. And truth be told, Jaime cannot recall the last time someone other than his family gave him a gift that bore on meaning. He cannot recall the last time someone put faith in him, trusted him, trusted him to be more than the expectations and rumors placed on his shoulders.

He used to have faith in himself, a Lannister’s foolish pride that will likely mean the end of all of them one of these days.

He used to have faith in what he did when he started to wear the White, blind to the circumstance under which Aerys gave it to him, with what intentions in the man’s wicked mind, which was to cut his father, not reward his son. Far from it.

He used to have faith until he realized what it meant to serve the man they once called King.

But the last time people had faith in him other than to betray, to disappoint, to lie, to live up to his name? Jaime cannot remember. Perhaps such a time never existed.

But it does now, Jaime thinks to himself, running his thumb over the fabric, transfixed by it. Or it did... because that faith, I have also successfully broken, haven’t I? Because I was too craven to stay?

Jaime stands up, the chains still wrapped around his wrists weighing very heavy all of a sudden, as though they were made of lead instead of iron.

Black birds fly into the sky until they are no more than dots in a cloudless sky, awakened by sounds coming from the East of the woods.

Jaime glances up to the crows. “Fuck!”

And that is when his feet start moving again.

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Endurance.

That is what Goodwin always told her she could outsmart her opponents with. They will all grow weary at some point, so they will let their guard down, but Brienne’s body can take it, can hold on, endure, and then, once the defenses fall, cut down, over and over again, until nothing but blood and flesh remains.

Her body was not made for beauty. It wasn’t made to appeal, to allure, to enchant or distract, it was made to endure, to take responsibility and bear it. It was molded out of steel, not glass. It doesn’t break, it just bends out of shape, only ever listens to the call of hammer and anvil raining down on her.

Brienne will take it, she will bear the marks, will bear those scars, if only to see her people protected under her shield. Because she cannot bear the loss of more of her people. She is supposed to be the tree to give shelter to her people, after all.

Because their future, their growth, is her responsibility, duty, and privilege.
However, standing her ground against what turned out to be twelve Boltonmen with faded flayed men painted on their leather vests has Brienne seeing blackness by the edges under every step and every blow she carries out and receives as she fights the men all on her own.

Sun has thankfully taken down two of them by now, but a direwolf will easily fall victim to the blade of a sharp battle axe, which is why the young woman rather has the wolf stay out of most of it, or else Sun will meet his end far before his time.

*Maybe the Kingslayer had the rights of it,* Brienne thinks to herself, panting. *If I had run fast enough to get help, then perhaps…*

But it makes no difference anymore, she knows that. The Kingslayer is gone, the villagers are out of reach, and it is only her and Sun standing between the wretched men now trying to tear another pound of flesh out of her people with their sharp knives and her one place that she has left as a home.

Losing is no option.

Running is no alternative.

It’s either dying defending her people or making it out alive but turn out victor. There is no middle ground. There is no in-between, no second chance.

There is only going forward, no matter the sacrifice.

Brienne ducks her head as one of the men lunges at her, managing to cut the man’s side to send him tumbling down the slope a bit. She could still curse herself for having left her battle axe and shield back at the house. The dagger works well enough, but it forces Brienne into close combat all the while, leaving her not much time to gather her strengths again and possibly get her hands on one of the men’s weapons in turn.

At first, Brienne still bore the faint hope that the men approaching were villagers from another town, lost hunters or scouts, but that hope vanished once she saw the emblem on their chests, saw their wicked smiles as they approached, axes and swords raised, licking their chapped lips in anticipation of the blood they want to spill, like that of the people her clan already lost to their bloodthirst.

“You should just give up,” one man laughs as he swings his sword before her, as though to taunt her. Brienne tried to get her hands on one of the men’s weapons, but she didn’t succeed just yet. Whenever Brienne tries to get there, she is being intercepted, which forces the young shieldmaiden into a more defensive position than she would like to, because Brienne knows that while she is endurable, her strengths are not endless.

*And the godforsaken head wound is not exactly helping the matter,* Brienne thinks to herself with loathing. *Yet another thing I owe you my gratitude for, Kingslayer.*

*Never,* Brienne thinks to herself, readjusting the grip on her bloodied blade.

It is no option, not for her, not ever.

She is not craven.

“If you drop the weapons now and bring us to your little village on your own, we will spare your life, you see?” another taunts her. “You just have to yield.”

“I will not,” Brienne retorts, not really surprised when the men break out laughing.
“I thought that was a man!” one croons, holding his stomach as laughter wrecks his body.

“She damn well look like one,” a second Boltomman agrees. “She just doesn’t sound like one.”

Brienne tries hard not to roll her eyes. Even in this situation, her mannish looks seem to matter far too much to most other people. Even now it comes to haunt her, even now there is laughter to chase Brienne to what may well be her last moments on this earth.

It just never stops.

“We are here for the Jarl, not you dumb bitch. Just lead us to him and we take it from there,” another says, trying to sound more sincere about the matter than his fellows.

“Ever the more a reason for me not to let you pass,” Brienne argues, flexing her fingers around her dagger, eyes fixed on the men to detect any movement announcing a new attack. She takes some solace in the fact that they don’t seem to know who she is, as they seem to reckon her to be some villager acting braver than she should.

“We just want to have a nice little chat,” he snickers.


“There is nothing like a chat with axes and swords,” the man says, throwing his weapon up and catching it again in a playful manner for emphasis.

“Oh, I agree,” Brienne tells him, nodding at her dagger. “I am just afraid that the Jarl is far too busy to see you, so you will have to take up with me instead.”

“As you will, woman,” the Boltonman says, licking the broad side of his axe with a mad kind of expression that has Brienne’s skin crawl. However, she won’t let that sway her as she tightens her grip on the weapon, stepping forward to signal the man that she will now take on him.

With confidence in his steps, the dark-haired man steps forward, axe raised, spirits reaching even higher at the prospect of fresh blood to coat his blade. “You know, maybe we shouldn’t kill you just yet, now that I think about it. Maybe we should have some more fun with you before we head to the village.”

He looks over his shoulder to his mates, some of whom snicker in approval, while others holler at him that she is “too ugly to bother to rape.”

“Think about it. We just have to get her to yield. And I’ve never been with a woman that big. It may well be a good warm-up for what we will do once we come to the village, because I bet there will be more women screaming for help once we get to them,” the man sneers, rewarding Brienne with a wicked smile. “When she’s good and wet, you may finish her off and after that is done…”

He doesn’t get to finish the thought as Brienne comes charging. The raven-haired man means to swing his axe straight at her center, but she lets herself fall to his left to slide past his blow, the dry leaves carrying her as expected, because in contrast to them, Brienne knows these woods, she knows these lands, and Brienne won’t let them take them away from her.

Never again.

Brienne hooks her heel around his to tear the wicked man to the ground, and while he tumbles to the floor, the shieldmaiden straightens up to kick him even further down the hill.
“Sun! Attack!” Brienne yells as she kicks the man’s axe out of his grasp and the direwolf comes charging instantly. The man with dark hair and beard tries to scramble away, but Sun is determined to listen to his master’s call.

“Seems like I am too big for you to handle,” Brienne mutters as she dashes down the hill to grab the man’s axe to finally have something beside the dagger to defend herself with. When she has the axe curled between her fingers, Brienne instantly has to swing it as the next man is on her heels, ready to strike and take her down.

Her arm is shaking from the impact of the man’s blow, a bulky warrior about her size, but of stronger build. From the corner of her eye she can see the raven man crawling away from Sun, trying to fend off the direwolf with the use of the dagger he pulled from his belt.

“Get that bitch!” he yells at the bulky man, who then smiles at her, “I don’t think you are too big for me to handle, though.”

Brienne lets out a bellowed yell of pain when the man punches her in the side with his free hand, knocking her off her knees over to the side and along with it the remains of air in her lungs. She grits her teeth as agony shoots up the left side of her body, leaving her without any air to breathe, reducing her to a whimpering heap of legs and arms and fury.

Nostrils flaring, she tries to put distance between herself and the large man.

“If you give up now, I swear I won’t hurt you as badly as I will if you keep fighting,” the man sneers, his voice a deep rumble.

“Likewise,” Brienne replies breathlessly, letting out a light, wet cough. The man only ever laughs at her in turn.

“That was your last chance, bitch,” he announces before raising his arm for the next swing. Brienne readjusts her grip on the axe to use it more as a shield for her arm instead of a weapon to cut with, because that is what shieldmaidens do, which seems to take the man by surprise for a moment there, but before Brienne can use that to her advantage, the bastard just lunges himself at her to tear her to the ground along with him.

Brienne feels all air leaving her again as they plummet to the ground. In the background, she can hear his friends holler at him to “take the bitch,” to “take her now,” which seems to only ever fuel him as the stinking man tries to pin her down, putting the entirety of his weight on her to keep the air out of her and with it, most of her power to fight back.

“I like it when they fight back, makes fucking them into surrender ever the more of a challenge,” he mutters at her as his big fingers already mean to grab onto whatever shred of her clothing he can get between them.

Cold fear clutches at Brienne for a moment, but then she gathers herself, kicking out from underneath him the best she can to get some room between them. The man seems to take that as a sign of victory as he gives her breeches a tug, but he fails to see that it was this moment Brienne needed to get her dagger out from underneath him and stab him right in the eye with it. The man cries out shrilly as he rolls over her to the other side, writhing in pain, his big palm clutching at his bloodied face, sending a spray of red onto the dry leaves on the ground.

Brienne stands up as fast as her already darkening mind and weakened body allow, staggering a few times as she tries to get as much air into her body as she can. She can feel warm blood dripping down the side of her face to leave the taste of copper on her tongue that makes her want to throw up,
but Brienne swallows all the bile down because she has no time for weakness.

She has to endure.

She has to hold on.

With only just Sun by her side she has to carry on.

With only just herself she has to withstand.

She has to prevail.

She has to protect.

Has to win.

Has to. Has to. Has to.

Brienne can barely move aside when she hears a whooshing sound brushing past her head as she almost forgot about the one archer of the group. She tries to run for cover, but that is when the young shieldmaiden sees that another man is missing from the group.

Brienne looks over her shoulder, her eyes widening as she catches sight of the missing man reappearing already far too close, swinging his battle axe at her. Brienne knows she won’t be able to dodge that blow, let alone escape its impact.

There is no alternative for that either.

However, suddenly, the man coils back as though Thor himself sent lighting through his body to stop him. Brienne can do nothing much but stare as the Boltonman crashes to the ground, a chain wrapped around his throat, pulling him backwards to the ground and onto the bloodied leaves.

“You,” Brienne mutters breathlessly as she watches the man who just escaped, the Kingslayer, wrestling with the man who was just about to kill her on the ground, using his chains to choke the life out of him.

Brienne’s mouth opens and closes, but then she has to dodge an attack from the front as another man comes charging, seemingly trying to get through to his companion to aid him.

He came back, she thinks to herself as she pushes against the man meaning to strike her with his sword. Why did he come back?

Her eyes fall back on the Kingslayer, who pushes the now unmoving man off of himself. A million questions lie on the tip of her tongue, but Brienne thinks better of it than to ask them when she slashes her opponent’s throat, a spray of blood slapping against her face as the man falls to his knees, making her shudder. She quickly grabs the sword from the dying man’s hand.

“Sun!” Brienne yells, the direwolf running up in front of her as she uses the moment to rush over to Jaime further down the slope.

Jaime’s eyes widen as the woman swings the axe, already fearing that the wench will prove to be very ungrateful, but when he pries his eyes back open, the chain keeping him from moving his arms freely coming apart at last. He is ever the more surprised when Brienne tosses the sword she just gathered at him, her blue eyes already going back to the remaining Boltonmen moving in closer despite the direwolf’s efforts.
“And here I thought you’d never trust me with a weapon, wench,” Jaime laughs, his fingers curling around the leather of the sword’s handle, feeling the strangely familiar weight, his blood starting to boil beneath the skin to a song so old, yet so deeply embedded into his mind that he can’t seem to remember a time when he didn’t know how two hum those bloody tunes.

“It’s dying this way or the other!” Brienne says, her wrists flexing around the axe. “And I rather have the way in which they pay for what they did to my people.”

“Good enough to me, so long you focus your attention on them instead of me. I’d suggest a truce for now,” Jaime tells her, rolling his arm to get used to the blade’s unfamiliar weight.


“Aye.” Jaime turns the sword in his hand another time, his smirk widening as he tilts his head to the side when the familiarity of the grip of the weight of a weapon in his hand flood into his mind, his body. “Oh, how much I missed this.”

After that, he charges the men coming down the hill. Jaime can hear the rush of blood in his ears as he cuts past wooden shield, battle axe, and sword, the familiar call for blood, for protection. The blood soon splattering against his skin feels as though it was pulsating against his flesh, not for the lives taken, but for the lives safeguarded. It is an old call that he forgot for a time, the sweetness of the sad tune that lies in the act of killing for a purpose.

Jaime has to take a step back when Brienne’s direwolf comes to his aid out of nowhere and takes the man down before he can do so much as raise his sword.

“Good mutt! Remember that the next time,” he calls out. Jaime briefly lets his gaze wander about the slope only to stop once his eyes come to rest on Brienne.

And he will have to give the shieldmaiden that much, the woman knows how to hold her ground against these men as she attacks with the same kind of fierceness with which she battled him before. Just that this time, two enemies stand on one side as they battle another foe. And Jaime must say, his body seems far too ready to let the wench have his back. He doesn’t even so much as turn his head when Brienne moves behind him to toss her axe at the archer coming out behind one of the trees to take a shot at him, the blade solidly sinking into the man’s chest, his last arrow flying high in the air, only to fall to the ground without ever finding a target made of flesh.

“Thanks for that, wench,” Jaime laughs. “Always good to know that you have my back.”

“For now.”

“For now indeed.”

A fragile truce.

The fight becomes more and more of a red blur as the two commence. With their forces combined, Jaime almost finds this fight over far too fast, because his blood is still singing for a fight filled with a purpose. However, even that feeling of loss is short-lived, because when the last man falls to the ground like a wet sack, Brienne sinks down to the earth she is so eager to protect at the very next instance. Because it tells him that this fight lasted far too long to wear a woman like Brienne down.

And while she is still conscious, Jaime has no doubt that the shieldmaiden is on the verge of passing out, which is small wonder, considering that she won that battle almost entirely alone, if not for his bit of support towards the end. Jaime wipes the back of his hand over his head, speckles of blood turning into streaks of red matching that of his crimson tunic.
And it feels good.

It feels like a bit of justice.

“Are you dying?” he asks Brienne breathlessly, surprising himself as his knees give way underneath him, which is why Jaime finds himself sitting across from her on the dry leaves right at the next moment. Though Jaime will blame the chains and the muddy pen for it any other day.

That much is for sure.

“Not yet,” Brienne says between ragged breaths. “You?”

“I am afraid not yet either,” Jaime chuckles, leaning his head back to watch the leaves peacefully rushing over the canopy as though nothing ever happened, as though no blood was shed on them, as though no one died today.

But that seems to be the thing with nature, with the world as a whole, it does not care for the petty fights of the people inhabiting the earth.

The game of the world is far greater than their own.

It just keeps going forward, moving forward.

“I have one question for you, Kingslayer,” Brienne says after a longer moment of just their ragged breaths filling the woods with sounds.

“Yes?” he says, gasping for air.

“Why come back?” Brienne asks, wincing as she readjusts her position.

Why didn’t he make a run for it?

Why did he return when he himself said that he had no reason for it?

What hindered him from returning to his people to his own conditions rather than the ones her father and he agreed upon?

What made him turn back around?

What made him pick a fight that may well have meant his own demise?

What made him stay?

What made him come back to here, to me?

“What do you want to hear? That I dreamed of you?” he huffs, but then shrugs his shoulders. “It didn’t feel right, simple as that.”

“Didn’t feel right?” Brienne repeats, not quite believing what she hears.

“Trust me in this, wench, I am as shocked as you are,” Jaime scoffs. “I had you, I beat you fair and square… well, however fair escape is, but you know how I mean it.”

Brienne stares as he drops the sword she gave him to her feet.

“Aren’t you running away again?” she asks.
Jaime licks his lips.

He should. He *definitely* should. Brienne likely wouldn’t be able to catch up with him after such a fight. Certainly, he would be easier caught than he would have had he not decided to return to help her, but he could still make it.

He should.

He *really* should.

“Doesn’t seem like it,” Jaime answers, surprising himself with the words. “I am too exhausted for the long travel now anyway.”

“That can’t be the only reason why,” Brienne insists. That man tries without relent, without ever giving in, no matter how often she beat him, no matter how many times that meant he slept in the muddy pen by now. She can’t imagine that being out of breath would stop Jaime from pursuing his own goals. A man who is willing to kill his king won’t stop short for much of anything if not for what he sees as good reason.

That is what the others said, and they were right… weren’t they?

“It’s no fun like that,” he says instead, though.

“No fun,” Brienne repeats, furrowing her eyebrows in utter confusion.

*He is not making any sense.*

“I want to *best* you. A Lannister’s foolish pride, I suppose. As things stood right now, they would have bested you. If someone gets to kill you, it’s me,” Jaime tells her with a grin tugging at his lips. “It’s just that simple even you should understand it, wench.”

“You are no trickster the likes of the God of Mischief Loki, Kingslayer. What is the reason why, for real now?” Brienne wants to know.

Jaime bites the inside of his cheek. The woman is far too good at peeking her dour head past his defenses, which he spent years to build higher and higher into the sky, for no one to climb, for no one to get past, to see. And truth be told, he doesn’t like the thought of being exposed, not after he spent such a long time building those walls around him.

*It is one of the few things that grow on Casterly Rock.*

“… I just… I just couldn’t do it. I don’t know why,” Jaime says, barely moving his lips apart as he speaks.

“So you will not run off now that you should know better?” Brienne asks quietly.

“I will likely seek a chance once it arises, but not right now, no,” Jaime answers, not looking at her as he speaks.

“You said so before,” she points out to him.

“Woman, if I had any intention to run, I would have left you to them, wouldn’t you agree?” Jaime huffs.

“And that’s what I don't understand,” she insists. “Why you came back even though you had no reason for it.”
“Every man for himself, is it not?”

“He was wrong after all, Brienne is certain of it now. Instead, she feels ever the surer that here beside her sits a man who wants nothing more but his freedom, and fears that people will break his trust by keeping him imprisoned or not returning him to his family as they promised. Because in this world, only few people keep their oaths.

Perhaps she is not the only one who has trouble trusting people after all that’s been.

“No, they weren’t,” Jaime agrees, coughing lightly. “Or else I would have messed up my own plan, no?”

“I can’t rule that out, no,” Jaime admits truthfully. “But I don’t think so, really. Father would not entrust my rescue to the likes of the Boltons. They are not known for… well, having the right temperament to rescue. Those are the men you send out for the kill. And… if my Father had sent them… there would have been more than twelve.”

Brienne nods her head slowly, contemplating his reply. “Are they here for the same thing that you came here for, do you know?”

“Most definitely not,” Jaime huffs, flashing a weary kind of smile. “No one would go for what my Father sent me. It’s something… quite uniquely needed for my home and m home alone.”

No, that is a very special kind of curse that brought him here, thanks to that wicked seer and his father seeing a chance to take advantage of people’s faith in heroes and tall tales. But that is not the stuff the Boltons are made out of.

They do not seek what his father is seeking.

And they are most certainly not striving for what Jaime set out for when he came to these stranger shores. He was looking for an alternative, to keep the peace and protect.

He came here for a purpose and came to fight for it.

But that is not what the Boltonmen do.

“But you won’t say what that was, will you?” Brienne sighs with a hint of a smile tugging at her chapped lips.

“I am afraid you will have to figure that out yourself,” Jaime chuckles softly, listening to the breeze, listening to the rustling of the leaves, the world that keeps on breathing when they can hardly get air into their lungs.

And strangely, Jaime finds himself momentarily at ease with that.
“Not today, that much is for sure,” Brienne says. “Not today.”

She will gladly leave all of that for another day, for when her face is not smeared with the blood of her enemies, for when she is not haunted by their laughter and their threats, for when she has figured out whether the man sitting across from her on the dry leaves can somehow be trusted or not.

But today is not the day for that.

“If you want to keep true to your word, we ought to head back to the house,” Brienne then tells him.

“I was already afraid that you were going to say that,” Jaime snorts. “But it can’t seem to be helped.”

He stands up more or less steadily, quick to extend his hand to Brienne as she struggles to stand. She looks at him with a weary kind of grimace.

“You really won’t trust me with this after you entrusted the sword into my care not long ago?” he snorts, finding it almost charming, but just almost.

“You may recall that when I helped you last time, you knocked me in the head with a stone,” Brienne huffs, pointing at the bloodied side of her head, surprising herself with the apparent jest in her voice.

“I suppose I can’t claim that this was merely an accident, but… I think I did what us Lannisters tend to do, which is to pay our debts. So now, take my hand and don’t be stubborn about it, woman. This is a courtesy from one warrior to another,” Jaime tells her. “We can continue our quarrels later on.”

Brienne hesitantly grabs his wrist and lets Jaime pull her to her feet.

He really is stronger than he looks, she ponders, though battling alongside him already showed her that he is not a famous warrior thanks to rumors alone.

The shieldmaiden sways back and forth on her feet a few times as her body still has to catch up to the information that they are not yet done. She quickly bends down to pick up the sword and stuff it into her belt.

Brienne tries her best to conceal her winces as the two start to walk, but she can see from looking at Jaime’s face just once that there is not much sense in hiding it, which is why she dares to hold her aching side as tightly as possible, thankful when Jaime slows down his steps to match her own.

Quite a change from what happened back by the well… thought perchance something grew out of sight after all…

“What of your little pet?” Jaime asks, letting his gaze wander about.

“He’ll be roaming around to see whether more Boltonmen are in hiding around the area,” Brienne tells him.

“Direwolves are smarter than I would have thought. Because Starks are awfully, stubbornly foolish in their quest for honor… though you will like that about them, I am sure. And they have that animal in their banner, too.”

“Sun has a great instinct, though wouldn’t know what he is doing half the time. Moon is the sober-minded one,” Brienne says as they continue down the mound.

“I knew the black one was the dumber of the two.”
“Not dumber, just… quick to make up his mind, I suppose,” the shieldmaiden ponders.

“It’s almost a pity I came late to see all of this. Must have been quite a show to see you rip those bastards to shreds alongside your slightly dumber direwolf,” Jaime jokes. Though of what he saw, he can deduce just what a fight Brienne must have put up before he arrived. And that is something Jaime certainly doesn’t envy the Boltonmen for. He got a taste of Brienne’s skills in combat, her stubbornness, and the sheer might in her mannish body before, after all.

He can still feel those bruises still.

“Well, maybe you should stay around next time to… to watch the entire fight,” Brienne says, screwing her eyes shut when she makes a too wide stride, which knocks the air out of her.

“Maybe I should,” he mutters, his left fist clenching and unclenching as they proceed down the hill. For some reason, Jaime feels pain shoot through him whenever he sees the woman wince, and that from wounds he knows he doesn’t bear. While Jaime got his fair share in the fight, too, and the Gods will know that he feels every damn cut and bruise right now already, his body seems keen on getting some more as it soaks up her agony as well as his own.

Staggering and stumbling, they make down the hill until they come past the well, the high grass, and at last, the small house the jarl and his daughter call their own. Both let a silent sigh of relief at the sight, maneuvering inside only to almost collapse on the chairs in the small kitchen where the fire is cracking in the hearth, unaware of the little war that raged outside.

“Rescuing shieldmaidens is much more tedious than I imagined it to be,” Jaime laughs drily as he tries to find a more comfortable position on the chair.

“Well, you chose that destiny yourself,” Brienne says, her gaze fixed on the ground where she pushes a wooden bucket filled with water over to sit between them on the ground. “Hands on the table, now.”

“What? You won’t have me tied up right now, will you? Wench, just a bit of time for my chafed wrists before…,” he means to lament, but Brienne already extends her own hands to grab his wrists to snap them on the table with a loud chink of the iron wrapped around them.

“Hands on the table, I said,” she demands through gritted teeth. Jaime watches as Brienne pulls up her left leg to reach into her boot and pull out a small key, with which she then starts to open the iron biting into the skin of his wrists. Jaime’s eyes open wide once realization hits him that she just undid his chains entirely.

“You had the key with you at all times?” he asks, still somewhat baffled by that revelation.

“Seems like you could have made a far better escape if you had paid more attention as to where I kept the key today,” Brienne scoffs. “And the day before that and the day before that…”

“Seems like it indeed,” Jaime mutters, turning his hands to feel the sweet relief of ache that comes with freedom. He almost hops up from the chair when suddenly cold joins the sweet relief. It is only then that Jaime becomes conscious of the fact that Brienne bent down to the bucket to take out a cloth to press to a cut he received in the battle, reaching from half his forearm down to the wrist.

Brienne dabs the wound with the cloth a few more times before checking it for more blood. “Seems like the bleeding is not too bad, so I think you’ll get around stitches or having it burned out. Maggy likes to do that even though she doesn’t see a thing. Some of the ointment I have form Maggy will likely suffice for a good healing.”
“I think you should focus your efforts on yourself, wench,” Jaime argues in a surprisingly soft tone of voice. “You likely took more damage than I did.”

Brienne licks her lips. “Not only Lannisters pay their debts. And I know that I owe you for this, Kingsl… Jaime.”

He looks at her with widened eyes, which goes unnoticed by the younger woman as she keeps busying herself with treating his cut. Jaime doesn’t know how the woman does it, but somehow, she can make his name sound so very different once it rolls from her lips.

In fact, it seems she can change some many things about him Jaime thought were cast into stone.

“I am fine, mostly,” he insists as he watches the woman start working on the cut with the tin of ointment that she grabbed with much effort from the other end of the table. “Wench, did you hear me?”

“I did,” she mutters, her face a stubborn pout, though her features are far too lax from the exhaustion to appear threatening.

“And yet you choose not to listen to me, stubborn thing you are,” he scoffs, only to notice the edge of desperation in the way Brienne continues putting ointment on his cut. And that is when Jaime starts to understand her words, truly hears them: It’s the one way she knows to pay back. It is one of the few ways Brienne has to show that she means it, that it’s more than just words.

And that only ever has his stomach turn into a painful knot because this woman is too good to be true, too honorable to be real. At some point Jaime still expects her to reveal herself as one of the Æsir one of these days, to shed her ungainly skin to reveal the godly truth underneath.

As much as Jaime wants to hate her, wants to despise her, wants to see his enemy in her, he can’t not fully, not wholly. That doesn’t mean he likes her, sure enough, but Brienne has something that so many people, himself included, lack these days: True heroism, true honor, a sense of duty exceeding clans, exceeding the conditions in which they find themselves, a thirst for peace and the will to protect it once it is achieved.

Jaime looks back at the woman sitting across from him, huddled over slightly as Brienne keeps working on his cuts and chafed wrists, though he can still see the mixture of dried and flesh blood from the head wound he caused her, which surely did not add favor to her fight, and yet she prevailed. He lets out a sigh before letting his left hand down to grab the piece of cloth Brienne left on the table after washing it out one more time to gently start wiping away the angry red on the side of her face.

Brienne tears her gaze up at him, somewhat aghast.

“I won’t do anything. I am also just trying to repay some debts, too, wench,” he assures her. “If I manage to give you a head wound, I suppose I might just as well clean it up now while you do the duty for my arm, hm?”

Though Jaime would like to laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of the situation that his first true act of using his now freed hands is to help the woman who chained him up in the first place. Nevertheless, his hand keeps going, surprising himself likely as much as her with the apparent gentleness he has to offer for a coarse woman the likes of Brienne, who, in turn, treats him with the same kind of caution.

A truce indeed, for now anyway.

“I thank you… for coming back,” Brienne almost whispers after a while, her blue eyes fixed on his
“You shouldn’t thank me. Next chance I get? I will escape, rest assured,” Jaime snorts with a grin tugging at his lips. “And then I won’t look back, trust me in this.”

“That doesn’t change a thing about what you did up the hill today. Because you had no reason to come back, and yet you did. You fought by your enemy’s side though you could have made your escape. You are my enemy’s enemy as well. And yet, you didn’t let them tear me apart. I owe you for it, it’s just that simple,” she says, but then corrects herself. “Jaime.”

The older man opens his mouth to say something, but then coils back when he sees a shadow in the doorframe. Brienne turns her gaze in direction of the portal, too, blinking as she catches sight of familiar shapes.

“Father.”

Jarl Selwyn steps closer, taking in the scenery for a moment, only to speed up to rush over to his daughter, almost falling to the ground once as his bad leg protests at the movement.

“What happened to you?” he demands to know, only to turn to Jaime with narrowed eyes. “If you did something to her a second time, I will…”

“He had no business with this, Father,” Brienne says quickly, surprising not just the jarl but also Jaime with that statement told with such confidence, even though the Kingslayer certainly knows it to be a lie, as he just wiped away at the part that was most certainly his involvement. “There were more Boltonmen coming through the woods. They were after you. They surprised us while we were gathering mushrooms and herbs. Twelve of them.”

“I knew I never should have let you go off on your own. It was far too dangerous so short after the ambush,” her father mutters, touching the side of her face with his big palms affectionately.

“It’s alright,” she assures him. “They are dead now, all of them. Thanks to Sun and… and him.”

She nods over at Jaime, who waves his hand ever so slightly at the jarl, though the older man seems only more shocked once he sees that Jaime can apparently use his hand for that matter now.

“How are you out of your chains?” he questions with narrowed eyes, certainly not trusting that fragile peace.

“I undid them so he could help me fight against them,” Brienne answers before Jaime can say much of anything. “He came to my aid at once, even before I freed him from his chains. He choked a man to death who was about to kill me from behind, at the risk of his own life. He fought bravely alongside me and helped defeat them. He helped protect me… And I have to say… I think I would have lost without his aid.”

Jaime can do nothing much but stare at Brienne as he did not think the woman had in herself to tell a lie that confident, but here she sits, blood smeared and bruised, after she had to endure so much, and still finds it in herself to keep her very own kind of promises.

“I am… I thank you, then,” Selwyn says to Jaime, who nods his head briefly. The jarl bends down to wrap his arms around his daughter, then, though Brienne can’t help but let out a shriek when he pulls her to himself and thus puts strain on her paining side.

“What is it?” he asks, aghast.
“One got me pretty bad on that side,” Brienne says with closed eyes.

“Oh, I am… I should get Maggy.”

“It’s fine,” she tells him quickly. “But maybe you could quickly fetch some comfrey salve? It grows in the small patch to the right outside the house. Green, fleshy leaves and lilac flowers.”

“Of course,” her father says, but then turns to Jaime. “And you…”

“I am too tired to do much of anything. Rescuing jarl’s daughters is a tedious business, you must know,” Jaime intervenes, offering an easy smirk.

“It’s fine, Father,” Brienne assures him. “I still have an axe if need be.”

“I will be right back, then,” the jarl says before hobbling back outside in search for the herb in question.

“Why did you lie?” Jaime asks quietly. He thought she was incapable of it, after all.

“Father would have you killed for it this time, if he were to know what you did before you turned out helpful,” Brienne answers, glancing out the door. “He already meant to do that the first time you went after me by the well. He may be a man seeking peace, but he will not let that slide for my sake more often than once. And that… would lead him down a path we must not travel on if we want to stay true to our ideals, true to our dream.”

True to their kingdom standing upon a hill, far from green fires and war, growing constantly, if slowly, but growing strong.

“I remember that much,” Jaime chuckles softly. “It’s just sweet to think that you don’t want me to die after all.”

“Not until the althing. I don’t want to put up with your father’s wrath, simple as that. Too tedious,” Brienne says with a hint of a smile. “Until then, I have all but two intentions: make sure you don’t kill us and make sure you don’t get yourself killed, easy as that.”

“And here I thought you all considered lynching me,” Jaime chuckles. She looks at him for a long moment, which makes his smile somewhat fade.

“Some in the village want your blood, but they still have to get through me first, in case you already forgot. And I keep my promises,” Brienne points out to him, but then her gaze wanders back to the door as her father comes back inside with a handful of herbs he seemingly pulled out with root and dirt along the way.

“That doesn’t look lilac, does it?” Jaime points out as he looks at the plant in the jarl’s hand. “It looks more like Lannister red to me.”

“That’s fine,” Brienne argues, quickly taking it from the older man. “I will cool my side first anyway. I thank you, Father.”

“Then let me fetch something to wrap your wounds with.”

“Bring some more for the Kingslayer,” Brienne calls after him, at which Jaime can’t help but grin. Once Selwyn disappears into his own room to gather whatever he can find for wrapping, Brienne is quick to put the herbs aside.
“Make sure not to touch those,” Brienne mutters under her breath.

“So they are the wrong kind?” he asks, amused.

“They help if you have tooth ache, but that’s about it,” Brienne answers quietly. “Comfrey salve, the actual kind, works wonders for bruises, though. It’s just that Father never learned to keep them apart.”

He trusted her to learn it, and so she did, and so she will continue to.

“I didn’t either. But I now know that they are not supposed to be Lannister red,” Jaime says with a smirk tugging at his lips.

“No, lilac,” Brienne agrees with a small smile.

Selwyn is quick to return with whatever he could gather to help wrap her side with. Under her instruction, the jarl helps her put ointment likely containing comfrey salve, at least Jaime reckons so, on her bruised side. Jaime watches wordlessly when Brienne pulls up her tunic to reveal the already blooming bruises on her left side to her father. He is sure that this side is going to give her trouble for at least a few more days, if not longer. The jarl is quick to apply the cream, a procedure Brienne goes through with only hissing a few times, seemingly not to worry her father any further, and then wraps the bandage tight around her midriff.

Once all is done, Jaime is surprised that the jarl himself follows through with wrapping his arm, too, a silent gesture of appreciation that still manages to catch him off-guard to the point that Jaime can do nothing much but smile to himself.

“What of the herbs?”

“I will use them later, thank you,” Brienne answers quickly, glowering at Jaime who is on the verge of laughing out loud, though he swallows it down the best he can.

“And what do we do about the chains now, you think?” her father questions when he sees the cuffs. “After all, he is your prisoner.”

“I think our guest earned some reward for his act of bravery… and I kept thinking… that perhaps we would have less trouble with him if he didn’t always feel the need to run away. Caged beasts have a tendency for that, whether they still have claws or not,” Brienne tells him, her eyes wandering over to Jaime for the briefest of moments before focusing back on the jarl.

“While I wouldn’t dare to let him walk around the village without a leash, I tend to think that he should be granted some freedom while around the house from now on. If it doesn’t work, we will put him back in chains, simple as that,” she continues. “How do you always say? We have to sow what we wish to harvest, Father.”

Jaime tries his best to hide the grin, not quite believing what travels past his ears. And here he thought the wench could never go out of her ways once she set her mind to it. There seems to be wonder indeed, if only to repay a debt Brienne thinks she owes him for doing the one thing that is right that Jaime managed to do in a long, long time.

And strangely so, it feels good, no matter how much his body aches because of the decision.

“He wouldn’t want to escape like that anyway,” she then adds. “That would be by far too easy, would it not?”
Jaime laughs out loud at that, well aware of the implication, or rather the challenge she just dared him into. “Indeed.”

“Father, I’d like to leave the affairs to you for handling the dead men up the hill,” she goes on to say, turning to the jarl with tired eyes. Selwyn offers a comforting smile, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Of course. I will take care of that. You should rest.”

“Thank you,” Brienne sighs, the words sounding like a bit of Valhalla to her as she already struggles to keep her eyes open. Her father helps her up and over to her chamber, Jaime following them wordlessly and without giving any indication of resistance of doing such without the leash to force him into the task.

Brienne is grateful when her father helps her lower herself down on her furs, welcoming the softness and warmth against her mostly unhurt other side.

Jaime walks into the room and means to resume his usual position on the other side, but as he means to walk on, Selwyn intercepts him on the way towards the door. For a moment, the Kingslayer expects the worst, but that is when he can feel the jarl’s big palm on his shoulder, the same spot where it came to rest upon that of his daughter before, steady but gentle all the same. “If you do something tonight, I will kill you.”

Jaime nods his head with a smirk. “Noted.”

“But foremost… I owe you my thanks,” Selwyn is quick to add, which has Jaime stare at him yet again. “You protected my daughter – and the laws do not demand that you do. That is all that matters to me today, and I would like to keep it so, at least for this day. So I thank you, Jaime Lannister.”

With that, the jarl leaves the chamber. Jaime lets himself sink down on his furs with a sigh, only now becoming conscious of just how much his body aches for sleep and nothing but sleep.

“So… we keep the truce for now, wench, yes? I am too tired to fight anymore today,” he moans, eyes already closed.

“We can keep it for now, yes,” she agrees with a heavy sigh.

“Good,” Jaime mutters, his face buried in the furs. “We can still fight tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow sounds good to me.”

But before either one can make any plans for the next battle, the two warriors are fast asleep, drifting into sweet nothingness, where there are no enemies, no feuds, just them and the blissful silence that rings from the top of the trees all the way to this small chamber.

And the war, for once, if only briefly, is put to an end, to give space for light to filter through the window, so things may grow that have not yet broken through the earth, but may very well one day.
Growing

Chapter Summary

Jaime learns some new things and Brienne and Selwyn have a crowd to calm.

Chapter Notes

*creeps out from under a rock*

Hello everyone, the name's Wacky. I know, you may not recognize me with the beard I am now facing from spending months in a hole, I guess, but writer's block is being uber nasty. I think I sprained my fanfic creativity somehow.

Anyway, I have been sitting at that chapter for Gods know how long and finally something to share with the class.

A special thanks to all those who left kind comments, I read them all with delight, even though I remained short on a reply, but procrastination is my nation and I felt bad at times, answering, knowing that I would not be able to deliver a new chapter any time soon.

I hope you'll enjoy this chapter.

Much love! ♥♥♥

Ever since the day that the Boltonmen almost managed to get past their defenses to attack the town, Brienne found herself somewhat adrift. Her father sent out men another time to see whether any more of them are hiding in their woods for a surprise attack, but days of search have revealed nothing, which is why she tries her best to return to normalcy. It won’t quite work that way, however.

Because Brienne dared something she didn’t believe possible until the words slipped from her lips with a kind of clarity she didn’t know she could muster to tell a lie that confident. The young woman made no mention to her father that her still healing head wound was the Kinglayer’s parting gift, not the result of the Boltonmen’s attack. She didn’t tell him that Jaime tried to run away and then returned to help her despite his parting gift having been firstly intended as a final parting gift. And all that regardless of the circumstance that Brienne does not like to lie. Indeed, she sees it as a great wrong in their world, something that corrupts alliances and destroys the peace instead of keeping it. However, she can’t seem to find it in herself to find it horrendous in this particular case because Brienne knows what consequences that would bear for the Kingslayer, if she were to decide to tell her father after all.
Jarl Selwyn is a man of reason, one who seeks peace where others shout their battle cries, and he surely tries his best to act that way at all times, act as the good example to a blood-thirsty people out for revenge, but Brienne also knows that on that one matter, his only living daughter, he makes no excuses. Not even to the likes of Jaime Lannister, not two times in a row.

And so, she now has Jaime roam through the house without a leash around his neck, without the chains wrapped around his wrists. And while the Kingslayer’s clever tongue took no damage in the fight, she finds herself strangely at peace with that. His presence still puts Brienne at unease. After all, their lives depend on it that he is returned to his father during the next althing, which makes keeping him her sworn duty, but Brienne finds herself breathing easier than she did a few days back.

Jaime made no attempt of escaping ever since that day in the woods. And while she won’t take the Kingslayer to the village without tying him up, Brienne is not that foolish, he has not tried to slip away since. It left her wondering since, just what are that man’s intentions? And how long will that truce last, if there is still so little trust to build upon?

That circumstance, in turn, seems to make having him sit across from her, fiddling his fingers absently, strangely normal all of a sudden, or at the least, far less threatening than some time ago. Brienne finds some of her muscles loosening these days, and she does not bother to check on him as often as she did in the very beginning of his captivity.

In fact, Jaime seems genuinely interested in observing her and her daily duties as Brienne continues to prepare barley for the stone querns as she ran out of flour. He watches her intently, almost the same way she caught him overlooking her training of the youths a number of times. Some time back, his eyes were far more focused on the open door, the window, any way of escape, but now he seems to escape only inside his head, to whatever place that may be.

Though Brienne knows better than to let down her defenses and allow herself to be blinded by a sudden sense of security. Jaime may have gotten her on those two occasions, but she will make sure that her father’s plan is being carried out and that Jaime is brought to the althing so that no more conflict arises. So that they can remain where they are, continue to build their home and keep it. They have no need for all of those quarrels, all that senseless war. They have other things to do, other things to grow.

_Futures, we have futures to grow. Whatever shape they may come to bear, but we will see them rise from the earth into the sky. I will see to that._

Brienne furrows her eyebrows when she realizes that Jaime’s focus only seems to intensify as he watches her prepare the barley, hardly taking his eyes off of the plant as it slips through her fingers into the basket underneath it. “Do you want to say something, Kingslayer?”

Jaime looks back up at her, blinking, and if she didn’t know better, Brienne would regard this as genuine surprise at having been caught. Though it only ever leaves her wondering just why he seems so focused on this, when her “playing peasant” seems to be a thorn in his side ever since he was dragged to town.

“Hm? Oh, now that you asked, wench… I wouldn’t have dared to speak up otherwise,” he chuckles softly, leaning back in his chair, and just like that, all of that genuine surprise disappears behind the mask of a smile he seemingly can’t help but leave aside.

Brienne rolls her eyes at him. “Right.”

“I am simply intrigued by the fact that you still have such rich harvest at that time of the year. Most others already struggle at this time and are relieved if they managed to gather enough over the earlier
months to make it through. This is something I only ever knew from the Reach and other regions with milder Winters,” Jaime points out, chewing on his bottom lip pensively.

Which was part of the reason why his father sought alliance with the Tyrells. That never came about, however. Renly Baratheon took Margaery Tyrell to bride before his father could so much as attempt to arrange a match between one of his sons and Jarl Mace’s daughter. Since the Queen of Thorns, as Olenna Tyrell is called, has no more female heirs to spare and because Jaime has no intention of becoming the man whore to the likes of Loras Tyrell, who is far too busy staying close to Renly for all he knows, that was yet another deal upon which futures could not grow.

Instead, they all continue to whither and decay.

In fact, Jaime came to believe that his father is cursed with the inability of growing much of anything, because the man is far too focused on paying for it with gold or building something out of stone that is meant to last a thousand years. Even though that means that his precious gardens remain unattended and without light.

But the plain truth is that you can’t eat stone walls, you can’t eat gold. Both are too tough to chew on, now lion’s teeth or not.

“Well, we are not in the Reach, as you may have noticed by now… or did that escape your notice?” Brienne points out, making a face. Just what is the Kingslayer’s interest in farming? She tended to think that this was all but punishment for him to even just observe.

“No, we are not in the Reach,” he sighs, allowing his gaze to wander over to the small window to look outside. “Which raises all but one question: how comes that you still have so much when you are not in the Reach, but rather in the regions the cold winds of Winter will come to blow at right after they swept across the North.”

And how comes that the same does not go for the West?

“I thought you are a warrior,” Brienne scoffs, to which he replies smugly, “And I think I have proven plentifully that I am. If not for me, you would be dead, wench.”

Jaime rewards her with a self-assured kind of grin that has Brienne only ever roll her big blue eyes at him in turn. She is well aware that he won’t ever let her see the end of it for the fact that he returned to help her out instead of running away. However, then Brienne reminds herself that she will see the end of it soon enough, once the althing has taken place. After that, they will go their separate ways, head to opposite shores, and that will truly be the end of all this.

Nothing will grow out of this, she hopes, because they have enough plants growing here that tend to shy away those they need the most.

“If not for you, I wouldn’t have almost died two times either,” she argues, wondering all the while how easy those words come, when they were most certainly no situations she was granted to take with ease.

When did the lion lose his teeth?

And when did she find herself in such a calm while sitting at one table with the man who was about to kill her?

Just what happened?

“But just almost. You should consider it more of a challenge than anything else,” Jaime laughs
easily. “And anyway, you have to look ahead, wench. Nothing much is to be found in the past.”

There is only ashes there, burned flesh melting from the bone, a madman screaming, shouting, screeching for more fire, more destruction, more deaths. No, nothing good is to be found in the past as far as Jaime is concerned. There is just the here and now. Futures are too far away and the past, with its putrid breath in the nape of his neck, is still far too close.

“We learn from the past,” Brienne argues, to which Jaime only ever sighs wearily, “And we let ourselves be consumed by it more often than not.”

Brienne frowns, but then continues prepping up the barley. Sometimes she has a feeling that Jaime wants to tell her something, but then, once it is just at the tip of his tongue, he swallows it back down and makes sure it stays right there, hidden deep inside himself to where no one can reach.

She will have to admit that, for herself, the past does not hold too many comforting memories either. And of those that remained, most are covered with dust, ash, and the image of an island catching green flame. Yet, Brienne wants to believe that the Gods taught them a lesson about vanity and false pride when their home was taken away from them, to show them that they aimed too high, reached too far before it was time.

And they learned that lesson, with all of its pain, all of its suffering.

They started over, smaller this time. They built it with their own bare hands, crafted that future and are now growing it, to harvest soon. Whether other jarls are willing to join their idea of that kind of a future is another matter, but Brienne wants to believe that this time, they will make things right.

Even if that means ducking their heads and staying low.

Even if that means marrying a lesser man, if only to keep her home.

Even if that means living a life that lies outside the prophecies and dreams she once had, because they are futile ground for the futures she can grow with her own two hands, for all it seems.

*This future shall grow, and it shall be a better one. This time, the Gods will be in our favor. This time, they will not fail us.*

“… So? Are we going to train the youths today?” Jaime asks, tilting his head to the side with a curious expression. While he found something strangely reassuring about a place of such tranquility, it also starts to drive him mad. The song of blood he felt cursing in his veins when he fought the Boltonmen may have sated some of that appetite, but Jaime hates to spend his days doing nothing, even more so when he still has missions to fulfill, however futile, however foolish the attempt.

“We are not training the youths, not today and not any other day. I am. You are just supposed to stay put and not run off. And no, they are out on patrol with the older men,” Brienne informs him. “Thus, you only have me to annoy for now.”

“Good,” Jaime chuckles softly. “They proved utterly useless last time. So maybe they learn something from their elders at last.”

Not that Jaime ever really did. Back in those days, he looked up to his eldest for guidance and all that came from them was silence. Sometimes it is the youth that has the courage to tell things as they are and refuse to accept them.

*Even if it costs you everything and more.*
“Ever the more a reason to let them be taught, so they are not useless next time,” Brienne points out drily, not meeting his gaze. She is well aware that they still have so much growth ahead of them, but the younger ones won’t ever learn if they are not given the chance of failure, the opportunity of making things right upon next try.

They need time and space to grow like everything else in the world.

Jaime rolls his shoulders with a sigh. “Well, you could leave them to me for a while. They would turn out perfect warriors by the time I’d be done with them. I am really good at that.”

Once time stopped going by at the Rock, Jaime actually found a bit of solace in teaching the young. After all, it is a privilege to learn from one of the best fighters in all of Westeros, if not from the best of men, he is aware. It soothed his aching heart to say different words from what he was taught, to look away because it was the king he was meant to protect, to be silent and obedient when every clan should have rebelled long since. It made him breathe easier to show them how to hold the sword and not to be afraid to use it in the name of what he hopes is a better cause than the one he pledged himself to.

He can teach those youths not to turn out like him.

Not that they could, of course. Because there are no men like him, only him.

“Would they?” Brienne huffs. “I seem to recall that I was beating you, so I am not entirely convinced what you would teach them that I haven’t already.”

“You were not beating me,” Jaime retorts. “And anyway, after that, I beat you.”

“And yet, you are still here,” she sighs. “So who’s won in the end, Kingslayer?”

Who won indeed? Jaime thinks to himself with a smirk tugging at his lips.

Or were there ever winners and losers in this most strange game?

Because Jaime doesn’t feel it as much as a loss as he would have expected when he still berated with himself on whether to go back to help Brienne against the Boltonmen or make a run for it. A part of him was prepared for the instant regret of not having taken the chance to get home, its soaring pain and hollowing emptiness. Yet, sitting here now, there is no regret for having stayed, if at all, he still feels bad for the wound he can still see healing on Brienne’s forehead, the parting gift that was not from the Boltons but him. And despite that, she didn’t give him away when she had the opportunity. Instead, Brienne lied for him, so Jaime would not suffer the jarl’s wrath.

There is one looming regret beyond all that, however, and that is the one that has been there ever since his ship was torn apart by the sea itself: that he failed his mission and that there seems to be no way to make things right, whether he takes flight or not.

What am I supposed to bring back home anyway? It seems that this plan actually drowned in the sea when we suffered shipwreck.

And that is the one thought Jaime truly loathes, to feel like he failed his people when he, at the very least, did not fail back in the capital. Though that was a different disease which could be brought to an end on the tip of a blade. For this sickness, however, cutting out the corrupted flesh will simply not suffice.

And a whole region will bleed for it, will bleed for false pride and jarls too eager on territory and renown than they are hungry for peace. Even though that has more chances to satisfy that very
“Well, you attacked my pride,” Jaime chuckles. “Knocking a shieldmaiden out to escape imprisonment is one thing, leaving a jarl’s daughter to the Boltons quite another. It was clear that you couldn’t handle it on your own. You should just face the truth, wench: You rely on me already, and don’t you just hate that?”

Though only the Gods will know how impressed Jaime found himself to be when he watched the mannish woman take on those men all by herself, and her wretched direwolf of course. Jaime had no doubt in his mind that Brienne is a gifted fighter. After all, he suffered her rage already, but it didn’t go unnoticed by him that her sheer bravery is matched by her skill. And that even though the woman dedicates so much of her time to the domestic, too.

But who knows? Maybe that is exactly what made her so strong for the other battles awaiting her.

“I don’t rely on you, I make sure you keep the truce until we can hand you back over to your father during the *althing*. That’s something entirely different,” Brienne corrects him, craning her long neck. “And if the lack of chains will keep you from making a run for it, all the better for me. Because that means I have both hands free to pull you down in case you decide to forego your promises after all.”

“Pull me down? Oh, so you want to take charge now, wench? I can well get behind letting you pull *me* down and tear off my clothes if that is more of your fancy,” he snickers with a dirty kind of grin that has Brienne shudder for one moment, and then scowl for the next.

Some things don’t change after all.

“Though I still try to understand why you would have done that anyway,” Brienne then adds, not looking at him as she speaks.


Brienne of all people should understand, shouldn’t she? What it’s like to be away from home, though it is your one true wish to be there in order to protect it. Because you failed before and don’t want to repeat that same error another time. How can she not see that with her big blue eyes?

“You could long since be considered our guest and be treated as such, which would make your stay so much easier for all of us,” Brienne points out to him matter-of-factly. “And anyway. *You* were the one to suggest to keep you here until the *althing*, I may remind you.”

It was his offer, his request, and yet, Jaime is the one constantly meaning to betray this deal, this promise he made. And that is what makes fury rise in the pit of Brienne’s stomach whenever she thinks of it. She has no illusion about it that Jaime has no intention of staying. Deep down, she understands his urge to be home, can feel it even despite the anger boiling deep within her. At the same time, he was the one to propose the deal and he keeps meaning to break it – and Brienne cannot accept that as the only excuse, not if he was given any indication that so long he abides their rules, he will get to go home.

*He has that chance, he’d just have to show a little patience… and a bit more honor, perhaps.*

Jaime rolls his shoulders. “What can I say, it’s still some time until then and I got bored.”

And *that* is what makes Brienne all the more disappointed, this nonchalance, the smirk tugging at his lips, the ease with which he can say those things. Because she knows that he is not being honest, but Brienne also knows that she will not learn the truth like that. Jaime won’t speak it, which means that she cannot truly rely on him past a certain point. In the end, he remains a liar.
And just like the Aesir will hold the great trickster Loki at their court, the Gods remain wary of his schemes nevertheless. However, Brienne does not want to fall for that when the Gods still tend to do in the tales, she cannot, must not. Because this is not Valhalla, not just yet.

“Right. So I assume that you wouldn’t want to share those reasons with me?” she asks, well aware what the answer is going to be.

“I am willing to share some many things with you, wench, foremost the furs, but for now, I think it is only safe to say that I have my reasons,” Jaime tells her with a smile he can’t bring himself to mean. Because a part of Jaime would like to tell her.

If only so that the way she looked at him changed.

If only to see a shift, a rupture.

If only for Brienne to look at him with those different kinds of blue eyes, the ones that hold within a softer gaze, a gentle feeling, one of understanding, and not the stares filled with nothing but misgiving.

However, Jaime knows better than to spoil secrets. He didn’t for Aerys, and that king was a madman undeserving of the honor of having his secrets kept. And so, Jaime won’t start for himself either. Some secrets stay best drowned at the bottom of the sea, bound to never see the surface again.

“Well, so long you cannot give me a proper answer, I suppose you should grow accustomed to the circumstance that I do not see how this makes any sense, then,” Brienne concludes, shaking her head. “Or is it just that you give that little on honor, Kingslayer? On keeping promises?”

“I have shit for honor, that is no secret,” Jaime snorts. “In general, most people who slew a King are not held in the highest regard.”

Even though it brought the freedom of the people from a madman.

Even though Jaime considers it his finest act.

But who wants to talk about that when more time can be wasted on the dishonor of the act?

Right, no one.

And Jaime is done correcting them, he is done trying to prove them wrong. He has better to do now, more important to do than guarding a King undeserving of his protection, more important than keeping a kingdom safe instead of letting it return to where it once was before the Targaryens assumed leadership, more important than the petty little fights over honor and oaths and what they mean.

“Well, maybe you are also due a lesson, so that you stop having just shit for honor,” Brienne goes on to suggest, which does take Jaime a bit by surprise.

“Are you sincerely putting me, the Kingslayer, Jaime Tywinson, on one level with those good-for-nothings who can’t even hold an axe without cutting themselves on its edge?” he huffs.

Brienne just rolls her broad shoulders at him silently, which only ever has Jaime laugh in turn. “How daring of you!”

“Alright, that’s enough barley,” Brienne announces when the last bit wanders into the basket. “Time
to grind the grains. Come now. I don’t have all day.”

Jaime throws his head back with a roll of his eyes. “Work, training, work, training, is there anything else you do just for the pleasure of it?”

“I enjoy both.” Brienne shrugs as she stands up and balances the basket on her broad hip.

Jaime shakes his head as he gets up from his chair as well. “You poor woman just don’t know what it’s like to enjoy yourself. Labor is supposed to be something you don’t enjoy but something you enjoy getting over with, to have more time for the more pleasant things in life.”

Jaime walks after her, swinging his legs from side to side as he goes, whereas Brienne, as always, walks in a straight line.

“Such as?” she asks, looking over her shoulder back at him.

“Drinking, eating, having a feast, going for a swim in the ocean, playing games, dozing off in bright daylight, lying in the grass,” Jaime recounts. “And of course the simple pleasures and ecstasies that come with some good old coupling. There’s nothing like bringing your flesh to songs and sighs as it is trapped between a woman’s thighs.”

“Is that a song they sing at the Rock?” Brienne snorts as she turns back around, though it doesn’t seem to Jaime that she has to look where she is going as her feet seem to know every pebble, every patch of moss by heart. There is no way of denying it that this woman is tied to this place with every part of her being.

Because this is her home.

“I heard it someplace,” Jaime answers, shrugging his shoulders. “I could teach it to you if you liked.”

“No, I don’t,” Brienne answers directly. “Thanks a lot.”

“Well, the offer always stands, wench,” Jaime chuckles. “For when you are finally willing to catch a break and stop laboring for once in favor of some pleasure. I would do all the work for you, so you could finally just enjoy the moment.”

“I take pleasure in my work, so that should suffice for now,” Brienne tells him as they reach the small canopied area to the left side of the longhouse where stone quern is located.

Jaime watches as Brienne puts down the basket to have both hands free. She lifts one stone disk to pour barley over the second, closes the lid again and then starts to turn the wooden handle attached at the top to turn the quern round and round again at a steady rhythm, as though it was a song, a melody. And Jaime can’t seem to take his eyes off of either her or the quern as white dust comes out of its edges.

For a long time, Jaime didn’t even bother with how a quern works, as that was labor done for him, not by him. He would simply eat the bread from the flour which was grinded in such a thing. However, those times have changed, not just because Jaime now finds himself in the broad hands of this woman, but also because of the mission the son of Tywin Lannister was sent out for.

Because in the end, you can’t eat gold.

He looks around, over to where the forest starts to crawl up the hill further up to where his eyes won’t reach. “So… your magical crops are up this way, aren’t they?”
“I don’t know how often I have to repeat this until you hear what I am saying, but we have no magical crops. We have crops, and they grow,” Brienne argues with a grunt, turning the quern over and over. “There is nothing magical about that. That’s what crops do.”

It is one of those tasks Brienne always tells the youths and young girls to carry out in order to strengthen their arms, their legs, their bodies, because apparently, you can get proper training even when you only ever mean to maintain your household. You just have to find ways to strengthen yourself even in the smallest of things, and therein you can also discover happiness, Brienne came to realize.

“They must be magical if they grow here. No one settled here until you did, for just that reason. It was known that nothing much beside moss and oaks grew here. By the time we landed by these shores, we expected to find only settlements heavy on the raids to keep themselves alive, but not… farmers who can provide for themselves without resourcing from other regions with richer grounds,” Jaime ponders, folding his arms over his chest.

“They grew here because they are crops, not magic. They don’t need anything to grow except the basic nutrients that the earth provides,” Brienne argues, continuing her steady rhythm of turning the quern. “Sometimes, treasures await us in the earth, we just have to dig deep enough.”

She had to learn that lesson as well, back during those days when she cursed the very earth she stood upon, only ever seeing it for dust and death, but over time, Brienne came to realize that chances were waiting in this earth, ready to come to bloom with the first spring rain mixed with her own tears.
“And sometimes there are no treasures, and yet we pretend them to be there,” Jaime mutters, which has Brienne frown at him. “Well, we have enough barley and rye for the Winter, so I assume that we do not pretend treasures to be there, though they are not.”

“Did you have special seedlings?” Jaime carries on.

“What is that supposed to mean? Special seedlings?” Brienne questions, furrowing her eyebrows, to which he shrugs. “I don’t know, something different. Did you take them from somewhere else? From your travels before you relocated o here? Is this another kind of rye or barley?”

“What’s it to you?” she asks, making a face, briefly letting the quern rest.

“I would just like to know,” he answers.

“You are no farmer.”


_A lesson some many people still have a hard time learning._

“And yet, you, as a jarl’s son, don’t have to bother,” Brienne argues. “As you keep repeating.”

Wasn’t that what he boasted about before? Isn’t that what makes her the lesser in the eyes of the many? That she is only the ugly, mannish daughter to a jarl who has not the same resources and power as the likes of Tywin Lannister?

“You bother and you are a jarl’s daughter,” Jaime points out to her.

She turns the handle of the quern faster this time. “A peasant girl according to you.”

“Well, what if I wanted to know what it’s like to be a peasant boy?” he asks, offering a strange kind of smirk Brienne can’t seem to read, no matter her efforts.

“So you do want to learn after all?” she huffs. “Now, there is wonder.”

“It’s not like there is much else for me to do, is there?” Jaime rolls his shoulders. “Might as well get to learn something to pass the time.”

Brienne lets go of the handle and straightens back up to ease her back. Her eyes then fix on Jaime. “Well, if that is so… how about you grind some grain, since I assume you never did that before?”

Jaime narrows his eyes at her in turn. “Does that mean I will get to see the crops thereafter?”

“Maybe,” Brienne answers as she opens the lid to reveal the grinded barley underneath.

“So likely not today,” he translates with a smirk.

“Likely not… See, learning is not that hard,” Brienne points out to him.

“Well, it might be for the best to train my arms again. My performance at the sword has suffered thanks to my captivation. They are still sore from the fight,” Jaime chuckles as he walks over to the quern. He watches as Brienne scoops up the remains of fresh flour in her big hands to put it in the wooden barrel set underneath the stone plates. Jaime bends his knees to follow her example to get the remaining flour into the barrel, taking a moment to look at the white powder coating his palm.

Who could have guessed that such a small thing can bear on such importance?
Brienne prepares the quern for the second round of grinding, still surprised when Jaime readily seizes the handle and starts to turn it round and round again. One should really think that such a task is something the Kingslayer would never bother doing, if not for his own gain, yet here he stands, grinding grain, and for all Brienne can judge, looking somewhat excited about that.

“Not too fast,” she warns him.

Jaime huffs at that, what nonsense. “The faster I grind the faster it is done.”

“No, then it gets too hot and it all sticks together.”

Jaime makes a face. Apparently, farmers now outwit him, too, not just witless youths. “That is more complicated than I imagined. And actually more challenging than I took it to be.”

“It simply takes a lot of training,” Brienne tells him, watching calmly as he keeps grinding. “You just have to learn.”

“Where are we going?”

Jaime watches as Brienne goes about her unusual routines of changing, now seemingly taking advantage of the fact that she no longer has him on a leash, as she makes him stay by the hearth while she gets changed in her own room. The minx won’t let him have even that bit of fun. After all, making her blush oh so furiously was one of the few merits he enjoyed while chained up.

“To the village,” he can hear her call out.

“At that hour? I thought it was time for the good night story already,” Jaime laments, leaning his head back as he looks outside the small window.

“We have a thing to attend, and I won’t leave you here to yourself,” Brienne explains as she emerges from her chamber in a clean tunic after the other one caught some dirt during the daily labors she seems so utterly fond of. Though the news of a thing is both promising and irritating for Jaime. Because he is quite sure that he will be at the center of attention, even though he doubts he will be allowed to speak.

*Not that this is anything new, of course.*

“But that means I have to wear the leash again,” he moans, kicking his legs underneath the table for emphasis once he sees her take up a rope.

“But *just* the leash,” Brienne assures him, though annoyance rings much louder.

“Still a leash,” he insists.

“Would you rather take the pen instead?”

“Not the pen!” he cries out.

“Then give me your hands and stop complaining,” she grunts as she covers the last bit of distance between them and bows down before him.

“Complaining is one of the few things I have left, woman. Don’t you dare take that away from me now, too,” he pouts, watching the woman take out some strips of cloth from her pouch.
Brienne rolls her eyes at him as she wraps the cloth around his wrist wordlessly, which Jaime takes as an actual sign of goodwill. They will be a great ease on his still aching wrists, and he won’t say no to that bit of comfort. After she is done with that, Brienne proceeds to make a complicated set of knots so that he couldn’t possibly struggle out of them.

“Just like in the good old days,” Jaime huffs, grimacing at his wrists being forced into familiar positions of submission, very much unfitting for a Lannister, even less so for the Kingslayer.

“That was not that long ago,” Brienne reminds him.

“It feels like eternities have passed since,” he chuckles.

“Oh, I very much share that sentiment,” Brienne scoffs. “Time seems to pass so much slower ever since you came here. Now come. I don’t want to be late.”

“But sweetling, we should use the rare opportunity of having the village all gathered down for oh so important business to have the house to ourselves and enjoy giving in to our dark desires. No one would hear you shout my name. For that, I don’t even need my hands,” Jaime teases, wriggling his wrists at her with the dirtiest of smirks.

“I have far more important matters to handle than this,” Brienne argues, shaking her head.

“There is nothing more important than that.”

“There certainly is.”

“That is the way you make an empire,” Jaime argues, grinning. “You fuck to make heirs, hm?”

Brienne rolls her big blue eyes at him in return. “As though we two were going to make heirs together.”

As far as Brienne is concerned, as far as she was proven over and over again, she should likely count herself lucky for anyone wanting to make heirs with her. How else would she be in this trouble with her father and Hyle Hunt?

“Oh, you know, you can always take the vows after the fucking. In fact, I am a strong proponent of that, just to be sure the other is not an utter failure under the furs,” Jaime points out to her. “When you trade, you don’t buy a pig in a poke either. Same should go for marriages, don’t you think?”

She rolls her shoulders tensely, making it look more like an awkward shrug. “Still no heirs, I am afraid.”

“I could make you one if you wanted,” Jaime offers, playfully biting his lip just to see her scowl. “It’s the small pleasures, after all.

“I think I will pass,” she scoffs, to which Jaime only ever shrugs. “Well, your loss, woman. I am outstanding at making heirs.”

“So you already made some?” Brienne questions, cocking an eyebrow at him. “I did not know that you actually had a bride at home.”

“I don’t. But I have no doubt that I am pretty good at the task,” Jaime replies.

“What gives you that kind of confidence?”
He smirks at her. “You are welcome to try for out for yourself, wench. Just a word is all I need.”

“I have one: No.”

“Ah, still playing hard-to-get, I see.”

“… We should be on our way,” Brienne scowls, quickly turning over to the door to look outside where darkness continues to swallow the lands.

“It’s not like I have much of a choice, is it?” Jaime sighs, getting to his feet.

“It’s the pen or coming along. That is a choice,” Brienne points out to him.

Jaime start moving towards the door with a sigh. “The things we do for… not being stuck in the pen, I suppose.”

And so, the two continue on their way down. Jaime watches the two blue and two red dots glowing in the nearing darkness flitting across the high grass and trees, announcing the presence of Brienne’s wolves. He noted some time back already that Brienne has the two patrol the area much more than she did before, which he reckons to be a good choice. A wolf will smell a stinking Boltonman coming to their shores before they will hear him approach and may warn them before they can creep up the hill to try to repeat what the others failed to do.

Jaime can’t help a small smirk once he realizes how little difficulty it gives him now to walk down the uneven path leading down the hill. Whenever Brienne dragged him either way once the lights started to fade from the sky, Jaime stumbled more often than he’d like to admit, but now, he doesn’t even have to watch his feet.

A small eternity indeed.

He turns his head when he can hear footsteps to the right, only to see the jarl approaching with the blind seer in tow.

“So he decided against the muddy pen?” Selwyn asks with a smirk.

“It appears so,” Brienne replies.

Jaime furrows his eyebrows at that exchange. “Was there earnestly any expectation that I would rather stay in the muddy pen?”

“It was more about whether you’d behave yourself not to earn yourself a night in the mud,” the jarl answers. Jaime appreciates that the man went a little easier on him those past few days. It almost makes him feel like a guest of the house.

Though only just almost.

Jaime knows better than to mistake welcoming gestures as tokens of goodwill and friendship. He once was fooled to swear himself to a man he thought wanted him by his side because he only wanted the best and saw it in Jaime. However, in the end, that man with a crown upon his head only ever wanted to spite his father so he could go on as he pleased. And what pleased him was eternal fire alone.

“Oh no, I was a nice Kingslayer most certainly. I would pet myself on the head if I could,” Jaime answers, nodding at his bound wrists for emphasis.
“Will you come to the thing as well, Maggy?” Brienne asks, looking at the short blind woman leaning on her cane. Brienne knows that the seer rather stays away from those matters unless she finds it necessary. Maggy always says that if you hear it from the Gods directly and the people whining about it the very next day, she just has to wait for the news to reach her. So why bother attending such an event in the first place, unless your presence is needed to make your opinion known?

“Your Father insisted that I come along. Thus, there was no way I could refuse, right?” Maggy answers. “It seems to me that he can’t bear without me, now can you, Jarl?”

“Hardly so,” Selwyn chuckles softly, gently patting her shoulder.

“You just know that I have the best mead I only share with my closest friends,” Maggy snorts, followed by an almost wheezing that soon turns into a sound of a shrill laughter.

“That may be part of the reason but not entirely,” the jarl chuckles.

“Be it as it may. I am still very much disappointed that you keep telling me that it would be inappropriate for me to ride in on one of your daughter’s wolves. You can be sure that we would have all of the fools’ attention after that!” Maggy laments.

“I wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself,” Selwyn points out to her in a mild voice. Though Maggy only ever snorts at that. “Oh, there is nothing much about this body that can still be hurt. It’s all on the verge of turning to dust, Jarl.”

“Ever the more a reason to make sure that you are protected from turning to dust before it is your time,” the jarl argues.

“And what an honor it is to be under the protection of the likes of you, Jarl,” Maggy laughs, turning her head in Jaime’s direction. “Do you like the new leash, Kingslayer?”

“What?” he gapes. “How do you that I have new…?”

“I can hear you struggling against ropes instead of irons like a wolf pup refusing the collar,” Maggy answers simply, flashing a wicked grin at him.

“I would much prefer lion cub as a description,” Jaime huffs. Her hearing is wickedly good, he will have to grant the old hag that much.

“Suit yourself. It’s naught to me. But I think I will choose your protection for the oh so dangerous way over to the longhouse at the far end of the path,” Maggy announces, stepping away from Selwyn and over to Jaime to hold on to the hem of his tunic. “He seems more confident in his steps than you as of late, my dear Jarl. And as you said, we don’t want me to turn to ashes and dust, at least not before it’s my time to pester the norns.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Selwyn assures her, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. Jaime keeps his expression blank, though he does wonder: what inspires confidence in him all of a sudden? Not long ago, Jarl Selwyn would hardly have trusted him to walk beside the woman. Because Jaime doesn’t take the man to be a fool, he really isn’t. That man doesn’t easily hand out his trust, and yet, here he stands, talking and laughing and smiling as though he was one of them, when Jaime knows, for a fact, that he is none of their own.

“Most kind of you, Jarl,” Maggy snickers, focusing her attention back on Jaime, rubbing her bony fingers in a circular motion against the fabric of his tunic. “Oh, I can feel red!”
“I think now you are just showing off with your seeing without sight,” Jaime scoffs.

“From whom do you think she got the red dye?” Maggy mutters only for him to hear.

Jaime smirks at that. “Not from the herb lady, then, I assume.”

“Then you assume right,” the old woman snickers softly. “I have the best mead and the best dye, after all.”

“The only thing I am lacking is the best housemate,” she then pronounces loudly.

“What trouble do you see in Sassa again?” Brienne exhales. “I thought you were impressed with how she handled herself when we treated the injured men.”

Brienne was pleasantly surprised once she saw Maggy somewhat softening to Sassa thereafter, but Maggy is like the tide, it always changes when you least expect it.

“It was a flicker of light in her dullness. But just the other day she’s asked me if she could take the day off! And that after I just agreed to teach her about the herbs you brought me, just after I wanted to teach her about how to make balms and creams and share with her my knowledge. And you and I know that this girl only wanted to spend the time screaming and squealing under some hairy fellow. If that girl winds up with child soon without getting wed before, you can be sure I will leave her to the other women to handle.” Maggy waves with the back of her hand, gurgling low in her throat towards the end to make her discontent known.

Jaime laughs to himself, quite enjoying those conversations against all odds. Despite the fact that the seer tends to make him uncomfortable more often than not, she does have a good sense of humor, he will have to give her that much.

“Perhaps you have to alter your methods in teaching her,” Brienne argues.

She saw that with the youths. They would not listen to her at first at all, when she showed up for the first time to train them in her father’s stead after he had his leg so badly injured. They would hardly look at her. So she had to learn to listen and react to that. And over time, she became better at it. While Brienne does not pride herself being perfect at the task, she sees things grow.

And that is all that matters. That we keep growing together. Stronger together.

“I am old. I don’t have to change my ways,” Maggy huffs.

“I think we all do,” Brienne argues.

“Stop speaking reason to me, child! I want to be mad at the little screamer!” Maggy pouts. “Jarl Selwyn, you do well to raise that daughter of yours. She already speaks the same amount of reason as you. And Gods know I hate it!”

“You actually love that,” he laughs.

“The Gods are testing me by giving that girl to me. And they are speaking through you as you were the one to assign her to me, Jarl.”

“I still find it a wise decision,” Selwyn argues. “She can learn from you and you may learn to alter your methods after all. It may benefit you both.”

“Silence now! Or else I will ride in on that direwolf just to ride towards my own end of misery! Now
let’s go before I actually turn to dust!” the seer calls out loudly. “Lead the way, Brienne, the Kingslayer and I will follow you wherever you take us.”

Jaime tilts his head as she walks a little closer to him, giving him a stern look. “You make her fall over once and you will spend the rest of your time here in the muddy pen, I warn you.”

“I had no such intention, but thank you for reminding me, wench. It’s always a relief to know that you always expect the worst of me,” he snorts.

So much to the trust, hm?

“It can’t harm to make you aware of it another time.”

He smirks at her brightly. “Duly noted, wench.”

“I always feels so treasured for an old hag who used to be a stranger to this clan, always so well protected by the jarl and his daughter,” Maggy chimes.

They start to walk in the order the seer suggested, Jarl Selwyn walking behind them while Brienne takes the front. Jaime can’t help but note that Brienne’s father, despite his bad leg, has a kind of dignity to his walk that he found most people lack. Selwyn has a way of carrying himself that is imposing but never quite threatening, which is much different from his own father who only inspires the latter, believing that the source of his power.

And it may well be that his threats will come to threaten us all soon enough.

“So, Kingslayer, still up to cause trouble, I heard?” Maggy questions, pulling his attention back to the seer wobbling on her feet next to him.

“Not as much, I daresay,” Jaime sighs, wondering if the seer knows anything about what happened back when the Boltonmen attacked and he ran away, only to come back to help Brienne at the last second.

Would she tell the Jarl if she knew? he wonders. And if she knew and did not tell him... why would she keep that from him?

“So you are learning after all. Good for you, good for you. It would be a pity if you took nothing from your stay here with us,” the old woman says with a grin.

“Well, I have a red tunic as a memorabilia now, as you can feel.”

Something to take home with me, Jaime thinks, only to feel almost shocked at the smile creeping up his lips at that thought. Shouldn’t he be praising the day he can forget about all this here? A small eternity passed, truly.

How else would you explain this kind of madness?

“Oh, so it only takes a bit of red to tame a mountain lion? Who could have guessed?” Maggy croons.

“A lion can never be tamed.”

“Right,” the old woman cackles.

“What?” Jaime scoffs, his lips curling into a frown. “Lions are wild beasts.”

“So are wolves, and I am sure I could ride one of the two if the Jarl just let me. Any wild beast can
be tamed. Any metal tempered and shaped into the form it has to take,” the seer argues, puckering her veiny lips. “And anyway. I don’t see the harm in being tamed.”

“You lose your freedom.”

“But you gain a home.”

Jaime says nothing at that and just continues to walk after Brienne silently as she leads them past the longhouses over to the one at the far end of the path. In the dark of the night, it seems like a beacon, with the torches flickering outside, casting their warm glow to battle back some of the ominous blackness prevailing at those hours of the day. Jaime can see more and more people heading the same direction. They are pouring into the longhouse like honey, cast in the light of the flames, chattering, talking, going about their daily lives as though they had not suffered a deep cut only a few days back.

Though then again, from what he gathered, as sad as it may be, this clan may have seen much worse than what the Boltonmen did to their soldiers. Jaime quickly sends the thought into the space beyond the glow, so the darkness may eat away at it in his stead, finding himself shivering from unexpected cold slapping against his skin.

“Oh, Jarl, you will have to control a crowd once more. I can already hear it from the shuffling of their feet that they are up for trouble,” Maggy tells Selwyn. “Though then again, when are they not?”

“We will certainly find a solution. That’s why we have gathered tonight,” Selwyn argues, stepping closer as he watches the people pour into the longhouse alongside them. Jaime studies the older man carefully, noting that if the jarl is distressed in any way, he hides it perfectly well from view.

“As I said, let me ride in on a wolf only just once and they will listen to you forever. That is my solution,” Maggy huffs, waving her wrist around in a circular motion.

“Fear is not the same as respect, and it is respect I mean to harvest, not to sow fear,” Selwyn tells her sternly.

“But just a bit of fear can’t harm the whole harvest, Jarl!”

“Maggy!”

Jaime shakes his head silently as they walk the rest of the way. His father would mean to differ quite a bit regarding the matter. Tywin Lannister believes that the only way to gain respect is to induce fear in the people, to have them believe without a doubt that he is willing to carry out horrid deeds if they disobey him, if they go up against him. Tywin taught him from an early age on that you have to be willing to carry out any threat you make, or else no one will ever believe in them. And for a long time, the Jarl of the Rock fared pretty well with that. However, he is now in a position where he has nothing to threaten people with. So perhaps Jarl Selwyn is the smarter of the two in that regard.

Because if people trust you, if they respect you instead of fearing you, they may be less eager to take you down once they detect even the smallest sign of weakness.

Maybe I should follow the seer’s suggestion and catch a mountain lion to ride into the city halls of Casterly Rock, sitting on its back. Who knows what that would change?

“Ah, thanks for guiding me, Kingslayer. The old hags the likes of me get lost so easily, but you seem to be on the right track at last,” Maggy laughs as she lets go of the hem of Jaime’s tunic and hobbles back over to Selwyn, not missing her step just once. He grimaces when he feels a tug on the leash, guiding him to the back of the longhouse.
“And I don’t get to come inside?” Jaime asks Brienne as she keeps pulling him away from what he thought was all their destination.

“Why would you? This thing is for our people. And you are none of our people,” Brienne points out to him drily.

“I am a guest. You said so yourself, wench, do I have to remind you?” he scoffs.

“Guests are still outsiders,” Brienne huffs, which makes him grin at her. “But where would I be if not by your side, wench?”

“You get to spend some time with the youths you are so fond of,” Brienne announces, gesturing ahead where the lads have gathered about a small fire, singing, or rather hollering, and passing around horns of mead.

“They are almost as bad as the bloody pen,” Jaime whines.

“Well, I won’t go all the way up to the house again just because you changed your mind. You made your choice, live with it, Kingslayer,” Brienne snorts. “Now come.”

The blonde woman takes him all the way to the youths huddled over by a small round of cut-up tree trunks, talking, jesting, fighting, or warming themselves on the fire shooting embers into the night’s sky. Jaime can’t help but smirk when he sees how they shrink back as they catch sight of the two of them approaching.

Scared little pigs, you are, Jaime thinks to himself with amusement, though it is only then that he realizes that the Jarl has been only just a few steps after them. It appears they are not just scared of the likes of the Kingslayer but also their leader.

And here I hoped I had them shaking in fear. I should make sure of it that they do, after all, I have to follow my father’s teachings, no?

“Scoot over,” Brienne orders the lad sitting closest to them. The boy readily moves away, if only to put as much distance as possible between himself and the Kingslayer, which has Jaime chuckle ever the harder. His father would be proud.

Brienne then turns her gaze to the left to spot Vidar sitting there. “Vidar, you take the leash.”

“Does it really have to be him? He was mean to me last time! And I don’t like his nose! It’s an eyesore!” Jaime pouts dramatically to which Brienne only ever rolls her eyes as she hands the rope over to the young man, not missing the opportunity to give it one last tug to make him almost fall over.

But just almost.

Jaime narrows his eyes at her wordlessly.

“Now, listen to me,” Selwyn speaks up, instantly having the attention of every youth sitting there. “I assign this important task to you while we hold the thing: You will watch the Kingslayer in our stead. Can I entrust him into your care?”

“Yes, Jarl!” the lads call out in unison.

“Good,” Selwyn calls out, nodding his head slowly. “Now I want you to remember: He is our prisoner, but we mean to treat him well. We want no future conflict with Jarl Tywin, as I told you
often enough by now. So you are free to hold him back if he makes an attempt to escape. Similarly, you are also free to hit back if he starts to attack you. However, unless he provokes conflict, you will not seek it. If he sits by, you will sit by his side, and that will be the end of it. Is that understood?"

“Yes, Jarl.”

“I trust you with him, so better don’t betray my trust,” he goes on.

Trust? In them? Jaime doesn’t know whether to laugh or admire this. It’s one thing to trust your men with what is likely the most valuable prisoner they ever made, quite another to have faith in youths who could not even stand upright back when the men came back bleeding and dying after the assault by the Boltons.

“Never, Jarl.”

“And believe me that much: he is going to tell me if you did something wrong because the Kingslayer has no reason to keep silent about the matter,” the jarl adds.

“No, I will complain and whine like a child, so just like them,” Jaime agrees, smiling broadly at them.

“You heard him. He doesn’t get to leave alone. I want one man on either side of his. Do we get each other?” Selwyn continues.

“Yes, Jarl.”

“Then he is yours to keep. And be easy on the mead,” their leader says, clapping Vidar on the shoulder before turning around to leave. Brienne shoots Jaime another glance he is unable to read before she hurries after her father. Jaime shakes his head before turning his attention back to the youths watching him with wide eyes.

“So… who wants to try his luck and lose against the Kingslayer?”

Brienne and Selwyn, meanwhile, reached the front of the longhouse again to catch up with Maggy to help her inside. Brienne takes her by the shoulder wordlessly as she leads her into the house, instantly caught up in the heat and the noise. It is as the seer said, the men are shuffling their feet. She can feel it in her bones.

Inside, Brienne lets her gaze wander about the hall. Her eyes come to a halt once they brush over the fabric she wove the night their men came back after they were ambushed by the Boltons. While she washed off most of the blood the next day, the young woman can still see the brownish outlines she hid in the red dye she applied thereafter. Her people bled for this and they shall never forget their sacrifice.

And we will never forget their lives foremost, the lives they grew, the lives they gave for our protection, for us.

The young woman shakes her head to turn her attention back to the front to follow her father’s lead as he makes his way to the very end to where three chairs were set up for them already. It doesn’t take her long to read the room. Brienne can see the discontent swimming up on so many faces that she easily loses count. It is hardly a surprise. Their old ways are running deep in the blood, and to keep calm, to seek out another way… it is hard. She herself finds the wishes for revenge beating and kicking like a prisoner struggling against his constraints. And Brienne knows that her father, for all his good intentions, can’t keep quiet when his one living daughter is in danger either. Even if that means risking all that he wants to see protected so very much.
The things we do for love…

“Is everyone there yet?” Selwyn asks everyone around.

“Yes,” one of the older men announces.

“Then close the door so we can begin,” the jarl orders, and so it is done. The people sit down as Brienne also lowers herself down on the chair next to her father’s. It is during those moments that she feels her father’s presence as the jarl more than others. The silence and calm he emits makes her realize each time just how he was made for this, whereas Brienne cannot say the same for herself, sadly.

No, for that you seemingly need someone else to do it for you, if Father’s words are to be believed.

Selwyn then rises again from his chair, letting his gaze wander about the room, looking each and every one in the eyes at least once. “Before we begin with the thing, I want to thank our brave men who defended our borders. And of those who died defending them, I know for certain that they now dine with the Gods, reunited with the family and friends, as they deserve. Their sacrifice shall never be forgotten.”

“Aye!” the men all agree wholeheartedly.

With that announcement, her father drops back into his chair, rubbing his fingers over his thigh a number of times to ease out some of the pain.

“Well, I think everyone knows what the urgent matters to discuss tonight are,” Selwyn continues, chewing on his bottom lip. “So we should not waste our time repeating the reasons why. I would ask you to tell me of your wishes and complaints, or whatever else you mean to share, so we can work on solutions. One at a time.”

It doesn’t take more than a second for the first to rise from his seat. Vidar’s father Halden, a grey-haired man who used to run a forgery back in their old life, is promptly to his feet, his eyes fixed on the window with a view on the back of the longhouse. “Why is the Kingslayer here without the chains we put on him?”

“He is my daughter’s prisoner. And she decided that he can be trusted to the point of only requiring the leash and being bound up,” Selwyn tells him calmly. “And I approved of that choice.”

“She must be a witless fool, then. He is the Kingslayer.”

Brienne narrows her eyes at him, but chooses to let the comment slide. “He helped me when it mattered, and that even though a captive has no obligation to come to the captor’s aid in times of an ambush. And it’s not like I leave him out of sight. Or do you think your sons can’t watch over a tied-up man, Halden?”

“My sons can do that just fine,” the older man retorts. Brienne well knows that particular men of his age are giving her a hard time, which is likely part of the reason why her father means to make her jarl in all but name, so that they will finally stay silent and yet, listen to her commands.

However, until that has happened, she will not keep silent. Brienne knows as well as any of them how much they lost, how much they suffered. If they want to forego their promises which they made back on the isle, then that is up to them, but then they can be no united people anymore, it is just that simple.

“That is what I thought, as I know fully well how capable your son is. I crossed blades with him
many times already. So what is supposed to happen while we discuss those matters?” Brienne asks, folding her muscular arms over her flat chest.

Halden shakes his head, chewing on his lower lip. “I still think we should just kill him off and burn his bones. What does Jarl Tywin know that we found him?”

“He will find out eventually,” Selwyn argues. “As far as the Kingslayer let on, his father well knows the region to where he was headed.”

“How so? It’s just one man. Who cares?”

“Exactly. One man. The one man that likely matters most to Jarl Tywin. The Kingslayer is his firstborn son. So what are you so afraid of if it is only just one man, tied-up, sitting by a fireplace, surrounded by your sons and the others’ sons?” Brienne retorts. “Because I tend to think we should be much more worried about his father being at odds with us than we should be about him being here for until the althing.”

“I am not afraid of anything.”

Brienne narrows her eyes at him. “And yet you tremble in fear of one man escaping.”

“My daughter has the rights of it,” Selwyn intercedes, though Brienne understands that he thereby also asks her to calm herself. It is one thing to speak up like that, another to stretch patience that’s already very thin. They are here for peace not war. “I told you often enough that I do not seek conflict, and I do not seek revenge. His actions do not justify his killing. His name should remind us of the gravitas of that action if it were to be carried out. It is just a few more moons until the althing takes place. We would do better treating him more like a guest than a prisoner, I believe. And after that, we can go back to our own ways.”

“Is it that you just seek a stronger alliance, Jarl? That Jarl Tywin will give you his son to wed to your daughter?” Sven then speaks up. He is about the Kingslayer’s age, dark-haired, muscular, and a gifted fighter. Back during the Tragedy he, too, lost his older brother and is now bound to take care of the wife and children his brother left behind for him to defend.

“You should watch your mouth,” Brienne interrupts him harshly. “This is still your Jarl you are speaking to.”

And what is far more important to her is that Sven talks about her marriage as though it was his concern. Only the Gods know that she already has to bother to consider their opinion on the matter when making her choice, but Brienne shall be damned if he gets through with making accusations about her father using the opportunity for a suitable match.

And the Kingslayer no less! He has to be out of his mind! What would Father or I want with him of all people in the world?

“I am just saying that we are not willing to have ourselves exposed to any more danger just because of marriage arrangements, Jarl,” Sven insists. “I have seen it, before I came to the Isle we all loved and then lost. It is no secret that your daughter is still unwed, so of course those are considerations you have to make. And it may seem a profitable match, now that you can appear in Jarl Tywin’s favor.”

Brienne glowers at him, her fingernails digging into the fabric of her tunic. That is where the old ways just won’t lead down new paths, no matter how many stones are moved out of the way. It always comes down to treaties of just that sort that either threaten to take her away from her home or
to be tied to a lesser man who will leave her in her place to be.

“That is not my reason,” Selwyn argues calmly, “and neither is it my intention. Whatever arrangements about my daughter’s marriage there may be have nothing to do with my decision to refuse to see any harm being done to Jaime Lannister.”

“Then what is the reason, Jarl?” Halden demands to know.

“It is the wisest choice, granted that we want to keep the peace, that is why,” Selwyn answers. “Jarl Tywin can easily annihilate us if he were to set his mind to it, but I know he only makes the effort if you give him a reason. We can present the facts to him at the althing and I am sure he will listen to us. It is the althing. We meet there in peace. We leave our weapons aside there for a reason. He will have even more of a reason if we bring him his son back unharmed. I have spoken to Jarl Tywin before, and while he is no man of charity by any means, he is a man mostly driven by rationale, at least when it comes to politics. Yet, he will not hear a word from us if there is any doubt in his mind that we may have had our part in either his son’s disappearance or death. We are seeking peace, I may remind you, and killing other clan members for lesser reasons will never get us there.”

That is how the violence continues, and how it would have continued already after the Tragedy if they had fallen back into the chorus of the old songs of blood and revenge. However, they decided against it. They didn’t have the resources, they simply would have died for the sake of getting revenge on those who swept over their lands like the unforgiving sea.

The only way the cycle ends is to no longer feed into it. That is the only way the well will run dry eventually is not to give it fresh water anymore.

“You want the peace. Some of us would not mind rising against the Boltons, for what they have done. Because we are no longer where we once stood, empty-handed on a handful of ships afloat on the ocean. We are no longer weak and beaten down. We came a long way since. Mayhaps it’s the Gods’ way of telling us that it is time for us to rise again,” Sven argues loudly, getting some agreeing nods and shouts from the remaining men in the room. “The old laws would give us any right to pay back in kind for the lives they took from us. So perhaps it’s less about the Kingslayer than it is about how we are yet again standing down and refuse to honor those who died defending us by not even considering to make them pay for their actions.”

“I think we are making ourselves seem weaker than we are, Jarl Selwyn. We could win some many fights. We have good warriors,” red-haired Darin argues, giving an almost mild look over to Brienne as he continues, “and able shieldmaidens, even. Maybe it is as Sven says, maybe it’s our time to rise again to let them know that the world may have beaten us down once but never again.”

“And what would that achieve, you tell me?” Selwyn disputes. “What would happen after we went to war against the Boltons? Raided their lands? Granted, that we would succeed, which is not a given, I may add. We would leave our women and children who are no shieldmaidens, who are no warriors, completely undefended. Anyone could come sweep them away, take our lands, and we would be right where we began anew after our old life ended. We would bring about our very own Ragnarök a second time. Do you really wish for that? Because I certainly don’t.”

“Then maybe leave some here. The shieldmaidens for instance,” Darin contends. “We can’t just swallow it all for the sake of the peace, Jarl. It didn’t work before, it seemingly isn’t working now, so why do we even keep trying? What’s it all worth if we keep losing? What is it all worth if no one other than us is keeping the peace?”

“You should ask yourself why you had faith in it back in the old life we shared in. If nothing has changed about that spirit inside your heart, Darin, you have your answer already. We wanted to stop
with the raids, we wanted to stop with the old ways. We wanted to have something different, focus on harvest and making sure that everyone had it well. We wanted our children to grow up without having to fear that their lives would be ended in a raid, that their fathers would not return from this one or the next, we wanted to teach them that there are other ways to earn one’s seat at Odin’s table. What happened to that spirit, you tell me?”

“Maybe it died back on Tarth,” Darin tells him, chewing on his bottom lip. “Alongside our families and friends who were devoured by the fire.”

Brienne’s father studies the other man for a long moment, then sighs as he shakes his head. She knows how heavy the guilt still weighs on his shoulders for that their plan of a better world went up in flames and so many people other than them had to suffer the consequences of it.

“And yet, you chose me as your jarl in our new life, too, when you had any chance to move out of the ways that may have died back on Tarth. And yet, you have been following my lead for many years since. And yet, you trusted me to lead you to safer shores,” Selwyn points out to him, his voice slightly shaking as he goes on. “For which I am most grateful, and will be to the end of my days. Because your trust in me has kept my faith in us when I felt like giving up. Because I, too, like each and every one of us, have lost things dear to me to the fire, to the sea.”

Brienne bows her head. They all lost greatly. Those scars will forever remain carved into their skin. And whenever her father speaks in that voice, she can see that he says the things the others feel deep inside but cannot express. Part of the reason why they still follow him is just that, his understanding for them, his trust in them.

You can only gain what you yourself inspire.
You only harvest what you seed and grow.

“And you have been a good jarl to us without a doubt. For many years. No one would ever dare question that, Jarl Selwyn. You guided us through the storm,” Darin assures him, meaning it with every ounce of his body. “You guided us to this shore and helped us start over new.”

“Then I ask of you to have a bit more faith in me, a bit more trust, to walk just a bit further with me despite the hardships we have been facing lately. Those changes we want to see happen to the world… they may work fast for our village, our people, but in the vast landscape of Westeros… it takes time, a lot of time, a lot effort, many tears, setbacks, falling down and getting back up again. But that doesn’t mean those changes are not worth fighting for,” the jarl explains. “That doesn’t mean those changes are not worth growing.”

“So we just mourn the dead and do nothing to avenge them?” Halden huffs.

“We mourn them and we do our best to ensure that it won’t happen again. We mourn them and see to it that their families are provided for, that they are kept safe. We mourn them and try to ease the pain of those suffering it. We have to get better at protecting our lands, our people. We have to do better patrolling our borders. We have to rain harder. Do more. That is what should be on our mind, if you asked me, not revenge. Once we are strong enough, no one can do us any harm anymore. If we have a near impenetrable protection, who could come for us? But the dead won’t benefit from the revenge, they will not come back to life if we succeed in cutting down all Boltonmen there are. But we can ensure that for their children and wives, now orphans and widows, there will be safety, that there will be better protection, that there will be life.”

“But what is that life worth if no one else is seeking it other than us?” Sven argues, biting back a tear.
“What were the lives worth of those we all left on the isle? Because they died in that spirit, wouldn’t you agree?” the jarl questions, swallowing thickly. “I think they brought the greatest sacrifice. I have to believe that because my son is with them now, and all those other people under my protection whom I could not save. We were granted a second chance here, and we have to use it. And I want to believe that it is best spent not neglecting but upholding what we have all sacrificed for.”

Silence spreads in the room as they all raise their horns and cups to those lost but never forgotten.

Jaime looks around, studying the little shits now tasked with his safe-keeping. They still strike him as incredibly dull, but at the very least they are easy on the mead this time around, which erases at least some of the folly from their witless expressions.

“… I hope the jarl gets better soon,” one boy announces loudly, poking a stick at the flames to watch the embers flit into the dark sky.

“Me, too. I miss training with him,” another dark-haired lad agrees, which prompts a third one to nudge him in the side. “That is because he went easier on you than his daughter does. She hits you any other day.”

“I don’t get it anyway. My father could train us all the same. And yet we are stuck with her.”

Jaime breaks out laughing at that, which has the youths look at him in utter irritation.

“What’s the matter now, Kingslayer?” the one holding his leash, Vidar, if Jaime remembers correctly, questions.

“You lament about how she is tough on you while at the same time you feel offended that she trains you. You are such witless fools. At least pick a side and stick to it,” Jaime snorts.

The boy just frowns at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“To put it really simple: If you think the woman is tough on you, then she is still beating you. And my best guess is that she would also still kick your dear father’s arse.”

“She would not. My father is a great fighter! He took part in raids back in the days! He can swing the axe like no other!”

“I have seen her fight, I think she would beat him. In fact, I am pretty sure she would.” Jaime teases, though he actually believes that to be true. He saw her fight the Boltonmen. By the Gods, he felt her fight against him. And while she was definitely not beating him, she was… rather close. And if she is close to beating him, then Jaime can say that much for certain: that boy’s father would only lick the dust beneath her boots if they were to battle.

“You haven’t seen my father fight! How would you know?”

“Because I bet the jarl has seen your father fight. Or am I wrong?” Jaime points out.

The boy furrows his eyebrows at him. “No?”

“Well, then that proves my point. Because he’s seen him fight… And yet, he lets his daughter handle the matter of keeping watch over the oh so dangerous Kingslayer instead of your oh so able father. Which should be telling, don’t you think?” Jaime snickers, taking pleasure in the boy’s cheeks.
heating up about as much as the flame in front of them.

“It’s his daughter. He is fond of her, so of course he singles her out,” another young man insists. “It’s no secret that she is of particular interest to him. She is his only family left.”

“So you think he singles her out by doing something that is not hers to do? Even though she has plenty to do with the shieldmaiden? You are truly foolish youths if you believe that the jarl does it to favor his daughter,” Jaime argues, letting his gaze wander about the youths sitting in a circle around him. “He just doesn’t think that your father or your father or your father or yours can do it as well as she can.”

“You have no clue about that. You are a stranger.”

“Which means I am unbiased.”

“You are her pet lion,” the boy scoffs.

Jaime snorts in utter amusement at that. “I am no one’s pet. I am a lion. And I have teeth to bite with, so you better be careful, my friend, or you may lose an ear or a nose, or those nasty little lips of yours. And do you really think my bias would be on her side for keeping me on a leash and pushing me around? Make no mistake, I am the first one to speak up against her if asked. So this is truly coming from someone who’d have any reason to tell you otherwise. But it’s the plain truth, so plain it hurts me to think that you are too blind to see it.”

Witless fools. The scoundrel of youth. It’s sad to know that I once was one of them, if for different reasons. But foolish no less.

“Listen to that, the Kingslayer wanting to speak the truth!” the one who was busy nudging his friends before laughs.

“Was that what you said to the King before you killed him?” another asks, quieter this time. 

Jaime takes his time to study the lad, then leans his head back to watch the embers disappearing into the night, the same way they did when that bloody seer back at the Rock stepped into his life for the first time and wanted him to see the world as he saw it and spoke of futures that never came.

Because the man never spoke to the Gods.

Because the Gods are likely not there.

And if they are, they are useless.

They don’t stop the suffering, ever. They just watch the whole world burn.

“I didn’t say much at all. But he kept cursing ‘Burn them all. Burn them all!’ over and over again,” Jaime says finally, only ever watching the embers fade away.

The youths look at him with either eyes or mouths standing wide open, which does amuse Jaime in turn. He is aware that most will have their little stories about what he actually did, and none of them are even remotely true, but he still appreciates the silence he can bring about with speaking just some simple truths about a time the people as a whole are eager to forget about.

“Oh, I seem to have destroyed the mood, my apologies,” he chuckles after a while. “Do go on with your lamentation about how tough a woman is on you, trying to train you so that you don’t get eaten by a mountain lion.”
Because lions cannot be tamed.

_Ever._

Brienne sighs, starting to feel dizzy. She already lost count of how many spoke for and against going after the Boltons. The arguments keep circulating, but her father would never forbid them from speaking. That was part of their treaty, part of their peace. Everyone has a voice and can make it known. When it comes to the big decisions, they stand as one.

And yet, she fears that the Boltons may tear them apart even more than they did by ripping those good men away from them.

“… I believe all who wanted to speak were given opportunity to make their position known. Or is there anyone else who wishes to speak his mind and was not yet heard?”

The people in the room shake their heads.

“Oh, if no one else will, I may use the meaningful silence to fill it with all my nonsense, Jarl,” Maggy then speaks up, hopping off her chair with her typical kind of smile.

“Be our guest,” Selwyn says, and no one would ever dare disagree with that as Maggy is the seer of their village.

“Did you receive a vision of what will come in the future again?” Sven asks.

“Would it sway you if I said that you all shat yourselves to death in one vision I had when you pursued the Boltons? I think not. You are too dull for that. Though you have a handsome face,” Maggy snickers. “So pretty.”

“Then what is the matter, seer?” Halden questions.

“The matter is that I find you all incredibly unwise,” Maggy answers. “Listen now. I speak to you as someone who has not suffered the fire. I speak to you as someone who’s only ever heard of its echo but never felt its heat. And I speak to you as someone who’s seen a many people come and go, like the waves. And as such I am telling you that the world is a dark place even without you casting even more shadows upon yourselves and the people you care about. I did not see it coming, that our men would suffer at their hands. I would have liked to warn them, but the Gods did not whisper. Why? Because the Gods do as they will. It was their time to go, they found. That was the Gods’ will and it is not ours to interfere with.”

A soft murmur goes through the crowd.

“However, the Gods’ will notwithstanding… Now it is our time to test our commitment to the cause you swore yourself to. Whether you are willing to live and uphold what you once wanted more than you sought revenge. It is your choice to make. And the consequences of that choice are the fruit you will harvest. The Gods do not decide for us. It is just that they know to where our choices lead.”

The murmurs become even louder and Brienne feels bruises forming on her thigh where she keeps digging her fingernails into her skin.

“So you better make a wise decision because I do not fancy being skinned by those damned bastards,” Maggy says finally, and with that, she sits back down, cackling to herself as she does.
“Is there anything you saw in the near future?” Halden questions.

“I saw a lot, but I saw different paths leading there,” Maggy answers, struggling back into her seat. “Though I will tell you that one was cast in the light while another remained cloaked in darkness. Which one leads to where? I do not know. The norns would not share. However, if you ask me for my personal opinion regarding your wishes for revenge… my advice as your seer is to trust your Jarl. He knows better than most of you ever will. Which is why you made him your Jarl, perhaps the smartest decision any of you ever made. I will stand by that. And so should you.”

“Anyone else wanting to speak?” Selwyn asks after a longer pause.

“That should be all.”

“Alright, then. On this matter, we will all have a say: Those of us who want to go after the Boltons to seek revenge say aye.”

Brienne observes the room as some raise their voices, though it is nothing compared to what she expected when she first walked inside.

“And those of you who want to protect these our lands say aye.”

She lets a sigh of relief when that cry is by far louder than the other.

“It is decided, then. We will remain here. Since the Kingslayer is my daughter’s prisoner, his fate lies in our hands. As such, he will remain with us as a guest until we can return him to his family during the next althing. Do I have everyone’s agreement on the matter?”

“Aye.”

“Then I thank you for your faith, my friends. It means more to me than words could possibly express. Now let us drink to our friends and family, as I am sure they are raising their horns for us right now in the halls of Valhalla.”

“Aye!”

Brienne looks down at the cup in her hands, then glances back over to the cloth she weaved the day she saw the life of her people slip through her bloodied fingers. She then takes a sip and lets the sweetness of the mead roll down her throat, trying to forget the taste of blood it leaves on her tongue, thinking back.

Because it is as her father says, they have to look forward, they cannot stand still, cannot afford to live in the past. The past burned, but new futures grew on their fields, to the point that even the Kingslayer cannot help but marvel at them.

They may have lost family and friends to the Boltons, but in the end, they did not win. Because there are still seedlings gleaming like emeralds in the first light of day. There are children playing in the streets, chasing one another around the longhouses.

There is a future, and it is thriving, it is growing.

And so that it can keep growing, they must protect it against cold winds blowing and embers soaring upward into the nights that seem ever the darker in the face of great loss.

Brienne does not remember the days her father keeps speaking of all the while. When they would sit like that at Evenfall Hall. She was too young to attend those things, which is why she only ever
heard them singing more or less in tune, heard them laughing and drinking to good harvest and secured borders. Back in those days, her father always muses, they were all kings and queens.

Those days are gone, however, long since, never to return again. They are peasants now, all of them. And over time, Brienne learned that perhaps it was a fortune. Because peasants know of the worth of the barley, know the importance of grain, meat, milk, and straw. They have a chance to walk the earth with eyes wide open, whereas most other jarls and those following them faithfully raise shields and axes with eyes closed, not bothering about what they may destroy in the wake of their pillaging and raiding.

And that all despite the fact that they once wanted it done differently. But then voices grew loud about being in need of one king, and the dragons answered to that call, and the dragons snaked themselves around the Red Keep, King’s Landing, the whole of Westeros, choked it until only bad blood spilled out and green fire roamed the earth. An act aimed at the unity of their people ultimately drove them apart.

It’s a strange kind of fate of our people. We seemingly can’t keep the peace for longer than a short while, one long breath.

“Brienne?”

She turns her head, surprised to see Sven next to her, tugging at her sleeve.

“What is it?” she asks, her muscles tensing. If the man wants to go back on the topic of her status as an unwed maiden, she cannot guarantee for anything.

“… I just… uhm, I apologize. I wasn’t trying to speak against you personally,” the older man says in a lowered voice.

“And yet you did,” Brienne notes coolly.

“Because I think marriage politics bring no good. Puts people in danger because it’s used to get lands,” Sven mutters.

Brienne snorts at that. “Well, rest assured that this is not my father’s intention.”

*Quite the opposite. The exact opposite!* she thinks to herself.

“Might not be his intention, may still be his temptation, though. You see, I saw what was a good in a marriage, with my brother and his Alva. They married for love. Tarth was their sanctuary after her first husband was… you know what he was.”

“I have heard,” Brienne agrees, nodding her head.

Alva is a woman hardened by circumstance, a woman you hardly see smiling and laughing these days, except for when she tends to her children. She was wed off by her father at a young age back when they still lived near Bronzegate. Neither her father nor her first husband were good men. They liked the taste of blood, followed their worst impulses and felt justified in doing so. Her father only ever agreed to the marriage to further his interest in the region. Her husband beat her around when she would not bear his children, though Alva came to note later that he seemingly could not give her any, not the other way around. The norns showed mercy with Alva’s fate, however. Her first husband drowned on a raid, after a paddle hit him in the face and he just dropped into the water and was lost at sea. And Alva? She fled before her father could consider a new marriage. She stole onto a ship, and that is when she met Leif, a far more skilled captain than her first husband. Leif took her to Tarth and then to bride. His children she bore and their children they loved like nothing in the world.
They lived a good life for a time, but then the Tragedy made Alva’s skin harder yet again as Leif sent his family on a boat, only to never get into one himself. He was a captain who drowned on dry land.

*Because the norns may have shown mercy once, but they don’t always.*

“I often say things that come out all wrong. I like you, you know I do. You’ve helped me time and time again, with Alva and the children especially. The boys like you well enough because you let them train a bit already,” Sven tells her, smirking at her nervously. “Hel, I don’t know what I’m doing half the time. I’m no family man, never was. That was Leif. Never me.”

“You are doing quite alright,” Brienne assures him. She saw him play with the children, saw him work doubly only just to be sure that they have it well.

“Alva begs to differ.”

“Alva always beg to differ.”

“The woman drives me insane half the time. All the time.”

Brienne chuckles at that. “Curiously, she says the same about you whenever I see her on the market.”

“That’s not at all curious. I suppose she wants me to be her Leif. But I am not. I’m not my brother, won’t ever be. I wanted to build a ship and sail it far away and only ever come back to impress everyone with goods from new lands. Now I get yelled at by my brother’s widow as I shovel shit.”

“I think he would be proud of you.”

“Oh, he’d be thrilled, I’m sure. Not because I look after his wife in his stead, of course, he’d rather have seen his children grow up by himself, but because he always wanted me to stay in one place and stop dreaming about faraway adventures. And that as a captain!”

“Well, sailors know the merit of coming home after a long journey, better than most ever will,” Brienne ponders. Sven smirks at her. “.. True.”

She smiles back at him faintly. It is those moments that make her realize how much she loves her people, even though they drive her about as mad as Alva drives Sven mad and Seven Alva. In the end, they were bound together by blood and fire that day, and that bond won’t wash away, no matter the tide.

“I just… I am sorry, is all I wanted to say. This was not against you, more against what… you know, I saw happen before, to others I like who were tossed into wedding business. Marriage these days… it’s a pain. All about people pissing at trees to mark their territory like damned dogs,” Sven says, pensively twisting his brother’s wooden necklace, Thor’s hammer, between his fingertips. “I take it all as a bad omen, you know? That the Boltons came for us on the night before a wedding. All bad signs. The Gods are telling us something, and I don’t know if we are listening.”

“The Gods guide us,” Brienne tells him. “They guided us to here, they will keep leading on. And anyway, you can rest assured that my father is not like Alva’s was.”

“I know. The Gods will assures you that I do. He’s the only jarl I ever felt good following. Would die for him any other day. Doesn’t mean he can’t have his own wishes. Doesn’t mean he can’t be misdirected. We are not the Gods, we are not without fault. None of us are.”

“Even the Gods are not,” Brienne agrees.
“Exactly. And I think we owe it to one another to look out for each other because of that,” Sven points out to her.

“As we always do.”

“Always will…,” the man says, before hesitantly adding, “So we are good?”

She nods. “We are good.”

Sven bows his head once before disappearing back into the crowd of men drinking and talking and already lamenting, the way they always are.

“What was that about?” her father asks, motioning closer.

“He apologized, is all.”

“Good,” Selwyn sighs, cocking an eyebrow at Sven, only to smile faintly for a brief moment. “I suppose I should have seen it coming that he would be one of those to speak up first. He was close friends with a lot of those who fell.”

“I don’t think it was that much about it, actually” Brienne argues, her eyes still set on Sven as well. “I think he’s just trying to do what we try, too. To protect what he holds dear.”

“If so, we may not be as divided as I feared,” her father ponders. “Are you ready to go or do you wish to last a while longer?”

“We can go, unless you want to stay.”

Selwyn shakes his head, rubbing his bad leg. “It is time to go home for me.”

“Then so it is for me, too.” Brienne smiles faintly at him before going ahead to gather Maggy who seems all the more eager to get out of the longhouse as well. Together, they make their way outside.

“I will fetch the Kingslayer. You two go ahead. I will catch up with you,” Brienne suggests, relishing the cold breeze against her skin.

“You will likely be up that house before we could as our bones are bristling, no?” Maggy huffs, sounding amused.

“And yet, you want to ride that direwolf,” Selwyn snorts.

“I want to go out in such fashion that I will be remembered, Jarl!”

“You will be remembered, rest assured.”

“But a direwolf-riding seer? A blind one? That’s the stuff legends are made out of.”

“I thought you said legends are for people who want to run from their own troubles.”

“Oh, believe me, I want to run from troubles. Squealing troubles!”

“Not that again.”

“Then make the little screamer pester someone else.”

“No.”
“Please?”

Brienne shakes her head with a smirk before walking to the back of the longhouse where the fire is still cracking outside, sending embers into the night’s sky like arrows, only to be swallowed by the blackness above.

The jarl’s daughter is surprised when she hears the Kingslayer’s voice ring out even from afar.

“… and then he charged right through, with a flaming sword in hand! It was like a comet came down from the sky! Only that it smelled of wine and piss! He roared and charged at the Greyjoys as though he was a madman on the loose. Upon reflection, he likely was a madman on the loose. But it worked! And then we broke through, crushed them like the sea buries stones underneath the weight of its waves!”

Brienne tilts her head when she hears the boys laughing and can see them looking at the Kingslayer as he recounts a battle story. Though it probably stands to reason. The stories they tend to hear are those of their fathers only. The youths must be aching for stories they don’t yet know. And while the Kingslayer still makes most of them, the youths included, weary, it goes without a doubt that this man attracts attention.

He is the man who slew the King, after all.

_A man legends are told about, more bad than good, but legends no less._

When he hears her footsteps, Jaime stops his tale and turns around to look at her smugly. “Ah, there you are, wench!”

“I see you behaved yourself?” she questioned, looking over at Vidar briefly, who only ever rolls his shoulders.

“I was a good mountain lion,” Jaime laughs, before turning back to the youths. “I fear I must part from you now, my witless fools. It was such a lovely get-together, we ought to repeat that sometime! I must yet tell you about the time I was given the honors by no one less than Arthur Dayne himself.”

And while he says it in mockery, if Brienne is not entirely mistaken, Jaime seems to enjoy it, the way the boys look at him as he stands, the way he has their undivided attention. For a man who wants nothing but stay away, for an outsider, Jaime seems to be strangely right within their lives, no matter their efforts to keep him outside in a muddy pen.

_Just what is it with this man?

“Come now,” Brienne orders, taking the rope from Vidar, prompting Jaime to get up and follow her lead. “Duty calls! Good night! Sleep tight, my little piglets!”

He waves his bound wrists in their direction before trotting after Brienne.

“It appears you enjoyed yourself, Kingslayer?” she notes as they walk.

Jaime grins, swinging back and forth as he takes the time to look at the village cast in the warm glow of the torches. “I gave it a show, didn’t I? I hate them and their guts so very much. And yet, they love me.”

“For that you hate them so much, you seemed quite happy to share stories with them,” Brienne points out, calling over her shoulder.
“Make no mistake, wench. Any fighter enjoys telling a good story. And the Siege of Pyke? That was a time worth legend.” He grins, to which Brienne cocks an eyebrow at him. “Is that so?”

Jaime speeds up a bit to come close enough to speak to her in a lowered voice. “If you liked, I could tell you the story, too. I could show you my battle scars I got there as well. I may even let you touch them.”

“No thanks.”

“Your loss.”

“My gain.”

He narrows his eyes at her. “How did the thing go?”

“None of your business,” she retorts drily.

“It is my business if they want to have me killed.”

“You won’t be killed, unless you kill someone first,” Brienne sighs.

“Will you go after the Boltons?” Jaime asks curiously.

“Not your concern.”

“But I would really like to know.”

“Then ask my father.”

“I am asking you, though.”

She gives the leash a light tug. “Walk.”

“I am. I can walk and talk at the same time. Look!” He gestures at himself.

“I may have to reconsider having you gagged after all,” she grumbles, which prompts Jaime to reward her with a dirty look. “Oh, is that how you like it, wench?”

“Frigg, give me strength,” she cries out in exasperation.

“You definitely should ask her for strength. You’ll need it for when you will finally have me under the furs,” Jaime snickers.

“Some things truly never change,” she exhales, looking up into the dark sky, only for the moon to finally break through the veil of clouds.

But others do, it seems, she adds only ever to herself. They learn and grow and the quern keeps turning... it is a strange world we live in, with so much in motion and yet so many other things remaining as inanimate as stone.

Brienne continues silently until they catch up with her father, who already managed to see Maggy off to her house, though even from afar they can hear the old woman fuss with Sassa, the poor girl.

Together, they make their way uphill silently, which leaves Jaime to the musing a second time that he does not even have to watch his feet to make his way up the mound. It appears this place starts to grow on him no matter his efforts to achieve the exact opposite.
But I shall be damned if I let that show too much. I am not a witless fool, not anymore. I know that I am a prisoner, only a guest if I abide their rules, but beyond that, the world remains at war and peace flies away on the burning embers to be swallowed by the night.

Once back in the house, Brienne is quick to lead Jaime into her chamber.

“So? Slipping under the furs with me now?” Jaime teases as she makes him sit down and kneels before him.

“By no means,” she says, already busyng herself to untie his wrists again. And while Jaime would not admit it, he appreciates that she keeps her part of the truce of giving him at least that bit of freedom for as long as he does not try to run off.

And compared to the irons, the ropes are almost a feathery touch against his skin.

“It’s time for you to sleep under those furs, no more, no less,” Brienne tells him as she loops up the rope and attaches it to her belt.

“Just a word, wench, just a word.”

“No.”

He snorts, flopping down on the furs in dramatic fashion, which has Brienne only ever roll her eyes at him. With that, she leaves the room to walk back into the kitchen. She quickly checks the cauldron and puts some items away she left around before leaving for the **thing**. However, seeing her father sitting at the table with a tight grimace tells her all that they are due some conversation. She sits down across from him silently.

“You don’t look too happy,” she notes quietly.

“Don’t I?” he sighs.

“Why, though?” Brienne questions. “They voted for what you proposed in the end.”

“But only in the end. I am not blind to the circumstance that there are many people who want to return to the old ways, who want to seek revenge. You heard them. They were loud and clear. Just because they were fewer in number tonight doesn’t mean it will continue to be that way.”

“I don’t have a good feeling about all this either, I will admit. One more strike against us from whatever side and they may be ready to call it all into question. And if the **karls** start to rebel, the whole village will suffer for it,” Brienne comments, chewing on the inside of her cheek nervously. “And we can’t have that so close to the **althing.**”

Selwyn shakes his head slowly. “I hoped the good harvest would overshadow some of it, but you know how it is with the bad blood, it bleeds out slowly.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” his daughter asks.

“Do what we did before, do what we did tonight: Give them confidence that they are being heard. Because that is what drives them even further apart, to feel as though their opinions don’t matter,” her father explains. “And beyond that… we have to see to it that the **althing** finally brings about some change not just for us but for everyone… our people are weary because they see the world run its usual course over and over again without a sign of change.”

Brienne leans back in her chair, crossing her arms over her flat chest. “… Or maybe we should just
wait for Hyle Hunt to come sweep me off my big feet. Then, at the very least, the men will stop with
the folly about how you mean to make a match for me with some certain people.”

He looks at her sternly. “Brienne.”

“I was wondering about that anyway. Why didn’t you bring it up? I thought this was the plan now. To
bring Hyle here and convince him to wed me to our conditions, no? You could have used that to
reassure them. Why didn’t you?” she wants to know, keeping her facial expression rigid.

“I didn’t bring it up because that is no one’s concern but our own. The karls have no say in that
whateversever so long I am here. This is between you and me. Because we are family. Because you are
my one living daughter,” he tells her.

Brienne looks aside. She knows better than to question her father’s devotion and love for her, but no
matter how she looks at it, it brings shivers down her spine to even think about Hyle Hunt coming to
their village, about seeing him again. Then she rather puts up for five more moons of the
Kingslayer’s japes, actually. Those are at least up-front. She can deal with that, but with Hyle? What
hurt was that she had him believe in something that wasn’t there. And now it is supposed to be?

**How do you grow futures on such uneven ground?**

“And if I may add that much about what is between you and me… If you truly wish to see Hyle, I
can arrange for that, but I won’t have him come here just so that your anger for him can gain new
flame. That’d be a waste of time for everyone,” he adds.

“Well, that flame will hardly ever die out, I’m afraid. Though you would think that the man would at
least try to creep his way up our hill to beg forgiveness, if he had any intention of wooing me in all
earnest,” Brienne scoffs.

“The jarl of his town said that they were going on a raid until the next moon,” Selwyn tells her. She
throws her head back at that, laughing drily. “Oh, how joyous! So he is also a raider now! And here I
thought that this is what we were eager to get away from, to return to where we were before
everyone forgot how to grow and only ever knew how to destroy.”

“He doesn’t seem eager for the raids.”

“He can seem like many things he is, in fact, not. I should know.”

“As I said, all I am asking of you is that you consider him, that you consider this choice for your life.
I am not saying that this is my will now and that you are to abide it. I just want you to see about him
another time, just to be sure that you don’t miss out on a choice you may come to regret for having
neglected without having given it sincere thought. People have found their way to marriage out of
graver situations.”

“He had a wager…,” Brienne wants to say, but her father won’t let her, “I know all that. And you
can believe me, when I heard of it, I was ready to beat him to pulp in front of everyone…”

Selwyn grits his teeth, balls his fists, and thereby tells Brienne even without the use of words just
how much he means that bit. However, then he sucks in a deep breath and eases out his hand until
his fingers start to relax again.

“But I also want to believe in forgiveness. I have to live by that as I demand it of my people to
execute it. Even if you don’t decide to wed him doesn’t mean you have to hate him for the rest of
your days. It’s been on your mind for how long now? Perhaps it would be healing for you, too. To
finally put it to rest,” her father suggests in a mild tone.
“So what? Just swallow it and take it?”

“I am sorry to put it that way, but if you can bring yourself to forgive the Kingslayer for all that he has already done to you, then I think at least considering to forgive Hyle is perhaps not as much of a leap as you still make it out to be,” Selwyn argues.

Brienne’s mouth stands open for a moment too long. She wants to tell him that it’s nonsense, but then she thinks back to the truce, thinks back to the things he could not know. And those weigh heavier than what her father is aware of.

“I try to forgive, and you should at the very last try to do the same. Be it the Kingslayer, be it Hyle Hunt. Whatever reaches beyond, that is up to you, my daughter, but if we want the people to let go of their revenge and embrace forgiveness, embrace protection, I think we ought to start with ourselves,” her father tells her, reaching out to grab her hand.

“… So I may forgive him but still decide against marrying him.”

“I won’t force you. I wouldn’t ever.”

Brienne runs her free hand over his hand holding her other with a tight grimace. “… But it will be a man like Hyle, then, whom I will have to wed in his stead. Eventually. Who else would take me to our conditions, right?”

Who would take me at all? Not just for a wager, not just for a jape? Those are all sweet fantasies and faraway dreams, no? Who would want such a beast if not for a reward?

“If you want to stay home… and if you want to have a family… I am afraid that… yes,” Selwyn says quietly, with the kind of clarity and earnestly she both loves and hates him for during moments such as these. Because she knows he makes good points, even though she would rather have him not.

Because Brienne wants to stay home. She wants to stay with her people. But she also wants to see those halls filled with more people than her father and herself. She wants to see children roaming, wants to see them sit on their grandfather’s lap so he may recount old battle stories to them. Brienne wants that just as much as she wants to fight, just as much as she wants to see things grow and bloom.

And it may be asked all too much, but just how much do I have to sacrifice to see that future growing? How much does it take to have such a future burgeon?

“Well, then I suppose our men have to be even less afraid of you making arrangements with certain other jarls, then, because there is no way that I am leaving our home. Ever,” Brienne concludes.

This is the place where she took root, where she started to grow.

And here she will continue to grow.

Only here can she thrive.

“It’s no decision we have to rush. In fact, we should not,” Selwyn tells her.

“Agreed,” she says before releasing his hand. “I think I have to sleep now. I’m tired after such a long day. And it will be just as long tomorrow. It always is.”

“Rest easy, my daughter. We won a small battle tonight.”
“And the war is yet to come,” Brienne sighs as she pushes the chair back. “Good night, father.”

“Good night.”

Inside Brienne’s room, Jaime lies on his back, tapping his fingers over his chest pensively. While he missed some details of the conversation as they were muttered and whispered, he got the gist of it. And that gist itself is quite… revealing.

Once he hears Brienne’s footsteps coming closer, Jaime quickly turns around to face the wall, screws his eyes shut and starts to snore. He can almost feel her gaze linger on him for a longer moment, but then Brienne walks past him, over to her own bed. Jaime listens to the belt and other things slipping to the ground as Brienne does quick work to change into her evening garb before slipping under the furs.

She continues to shuffle for a while on the furs, searching for comfort Brienne seems incapable of finding. It continues for a while, but then, at last, her breath starts to even out and sleep overtakes her before her bothersome thoughts can.

As he listens to her breathing, Jaime can’t help but think back to what the seer said to him, how being tamed may gain you a home. So is it that she spoke to him, truly, or did she actually speak about the woman sleeping on the other side of the room? Because, for all it seems, this wild shieldmaiden means to tame herself for the sake of keeping that home.

And that has him wondering if being tamed is really at all worth it.

*If freedom is the price for it.*

Jaime quickly abandons the thought when he turns on his side, wincing when something pokes into his side. He grunts as his fingers slip down his midriff until the culprit is found. He holds it up to catch its sight in the dim moonlight, only to have to try hard not to laugh as he sees the spikelet of a barley stalk twirl between his fingertips.

*And what’s the price for this?* he wonders, unable to keep himself from smiling at the barley glistening in the moonlight as though it was made of glass. *Is that worth being tamed for?*

Jaime turns on his back and brushes the spikelet across his face, takes in its texture, its scent. And he cannot wipe the smile away with it, he just can’t. Because he learned today, learned something he did not know.

And just as fast as it came, his smile fades into the darkness of the night. A single tear runs down the side of his face, glistening in the moonlight as though it was of glass as well.

*What’s the price for this?*

Because he really needs to know, he really needs to learn.

After all, a Lannister always pays his debts.