A Twist of Fate

by ChocoNut

Summary

As soon as Catelyn dispatches Jaime with Brienne to King's Landing, the road trip takes a turn when Jaime manages to overpower the wench and take her hostage. Roles are reversed and they continue their journey to King's Landing, this time on his terms.

NOTE: Will be updated tentatively twice a month (sooner, whenever I can manage it), and I'm planning to finish this by year end.

Notes

Diverges at the beginning of their trip.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter Notes

Lovely cover art by Ro Nordmann :)

Lovely cover art by Ro Nordmann. Thank you so much for sharing this wonderful piece of fan art
<3

“You’re much uglier in daylight!”
Repelled by the sight of the beastly woman in front of him, while unable to tear his eyes away from her at the same time, Jaime wasted no time in speaking his mind as soon as she pulled away the cloth covering his head. Filled with revulsion at his misfortune of being forced to spend the rest of the journey in the company of this wench, his mind was alive with activity as he explored the possibilities of breaking free. He wanted to make it to King’s Landing, but on his terms, not as the hostage of some fucking Stark bodyguard. One who was neither a man by way of creation, nor a woman by any standards of femininity. From the time he had set eyes on her, he had a lingering doubt—was she really a woman?

“What’s your name?” he demanded, as she manhandled him, dragging him to his feet. “I’m Jaime Lannister of Casterly Rock, son of Tywin,” he announced pompously, searching her face for the reaction that he expected. Her persistent silence took him by surprise. For the first time his name, and more so the identity of his house failed to evoke the revered response it usually did. This ugly wench didn’t seem to bother to acknowledge who he was, nor did she take the trouble to answer him.

Jaime kept stealing glances at her as they trudged along for a while in silence. He was beginning to get uncomfortable, finding it increasingly difficult to keep his mouth shut. If this continued till the end of their journey, he would die of boredom long before he could make it home. He preferred a quick death at the hands of an adversary any day rather than this slow, painful end. But for the moment, he saw no choice. Resigned to the fact that he would have to put up with his fate, he decided to push her into talking. If this bloody wench was destined to be his only companion for the days to come, he might as well know who she was, her strengths and weaknesses.

“A captured knight has the right to know his captor’s identity,” he decided to have a go at it again, this time trying a different tack.

“Brienne of Tarth,” she finally replied, her disgust for him clearly evident in her sour expression. *So the woman can speak.*

“Tarth… Tarth,” he wondered aloud. “Crescent moon and Starbursts…” He recognized the house as their sigil came to his mind. “Lord… Selwyn Tarth!” he exclaimed, recollecting the name. “Your father.” So she was indeed a lady, though only by title as he had pretty much surmised from her crisp, sophisticated speech.

Yet again, no reaction. He couldn’t help wondering if she was made of wood, for he was yet to meet someone as lifeless as her. The only notable feature on that face was the pair of eyes that she had been gifted with, vivid, blue pools that seemed out of place on that broad, homely face. “Do you have any brothers and sisters, my lady?” he asked, despite being aware of her family. He was rewarded not with a reply, but another shove from her. “It’s a long way to King’s Landing, we might as well get to know one another,” he complained, finding it impossible to bear the deathly silence. There was something horribly appealing about this woman that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. He found himself intrigued and fighting a losing battle to resist the urge to find out more about her than the bare minimum that courtesy and necessity of knowledge of the enemy demanded.

“Not interested,” she grunted, seemingly a woman of few words. “My job is to get you to King’s Landing safely, not to entertain you with empty talk, Kingslayer.” He didn’t miss the bitterness in her tone when she uttered the word *Kingslayer.* The same old, familiar tinge of abhorrence that he had been putting up with year after year, for the last seventeen years. Everyone looked at him in the same light - Kingslayer, Oathbreaker, man without honour… and this wench was no different.

“Oh, of course, you’re interested,” he egged her on, discovering that he took special pleasure in infuriating her. “No woman’s been able to resist my charms, my lady, and you are no different.” Despite himself, he gave her his most charming smile, as an afterthought, wondering why he did so.
“I’d rather die than fall for your self proclaimed charms, Kingslayer,” she lashed out at him, her face turning red at the unwarranted provocation.

And I’d love nothing more than to aid you with that, Jaime thought, relishing the idea of driving his sword through her heart. “My name’s Jaime,” he corrected her indignantly, somehow finding the word kingslayer even more repugnant when it fell from her lips.

“In my eyes, you’ll always be the Kingslayer.” She appeared to enjoy using the word, placing added emphasis on it whenever she could, much to his growing irritation.

To that, Jaime had no fitting retort and they continued walking, the deathly quiet once again beginning to get on his nerves. “Have you known many men?” he resumed conversation, as she dragged him towards a boat waiting for them at the bank of the river. “I suppose not,” he concluded when she didn’t reply. “Women?” he suggested, half-convinced that she was queer. Men were probably not her type. After all, which self respecting man with decent eyesight would want to bed a woman like her? If he were to speak for himself, it was an easy choice. Far from having her warm his bed, he wouldn’t want to be anywhere within an arm’s length of distance from her. Touching her was out of question with even the slightest physical contact enough to make him recoil in disgust.

Again, just the same stony look on her face. Was this woman capable of any other expression?

“Horses?” he taunted, this time, his intention purely to provoke her into responding. And it worked, earning him the reaction he expected. She shoved him to the ground so hard that he was on his knees, a loud groan escaping his lips. “I didn’t mean to cause offence, my lady, forgive me,” he said insincerely, his tone anything but apologetic.

Craning his neck, he spotted a carriage passing on the bridge in the distance. He made an attempt to get to his feet but she bent his head down forcibly. “Your crimes are past forgiveness, Kingslayer,” she said bitterly, hiding him from anyone who could see them from a distance.

“Why do you hate me so much? Have I ever harmed you?” Jaime asked, before he could stop himself. Why was he trying to justify his past to this revolting stranger? How did it matter what she thought of him?

“You’ve harmed others,” she panted, her tone oozing hatred. "The weak, the innocent--"

"Has anyone ever told you you're as boring as you are ugly?" The only way to distract her was through insults. He had to get her worked up enough to make a mistake, to lower her guard so that he had an opportunity to cut loose.

It looked as though he had won half the battle. She was livid. "You will not provoke me to anger!"

"I already have." He laughed. "Look at you, you're ready to chop my head off." When his comment attracted no further response, he decided to distract her in a different way. "Do you think you could beat me in a fair fight?"

"I've never seen you fight." His ploy was working and her agitation heightened, her grip on him loosening as she lost her cool.

"The answer is no. There are three men in the kingdom who might stand a chance against me and you're not one of them," he stated categorically.

"All my life men like you have been sneering at me, and all my life I've been knocking men like you into the dust." He could feel her hands shaking in anger. As her eyes focussed on the movement in the distance, he felt her grip on him slacken further.
This was his chance. It was now or never.

Jaime’s mind raced as he weighed his options, and he instantly made his decision. Taking advantage of her distraction, he turned around, throwing himself on her and pushing her backwards. Caught unawares by his sudden movement, she relaxed her hold on him. That miniscule window of a second was enough for him. Grasping the hilt of the sword on her waist, he grabbed it, immediately cutting down the rope that held him in her control. Taking her hand off his shoulder, she reached for the other sword on her belt in a desperate bid to arm herself. He jabbed her in the stomach with his elbow and scrambled to his feet bringing his sword to position in a two-handed grip. She stumbled, but almost immediately regained her balance and pulled out her sword. Giving her no time to steady herself and attack, he tripped her sending her crashing to the ground.

He wanted to finish her off once and for all, to put an end to this infuriating woman, to end his year-long captivity, but she was too quick for him. Before he could strike the fatal blow, she had sprung to her feet again and was facing him, blade in position, ready for him. He cursed himself for being slack, for he should have easily ended it there! After nearly a year of confinement, his reflexes had clearly rusted.

However, he decided not to fret over it, still having a fairly decent chance to defeat her and earn himself his long awaited freedom. “I wonder why some knights feel the need to carry two swords,” he mocked, trying to divert her attention while pointing the sword at her.

Ignoring the taunt, she took position to strike him. “Give me the sword, Kingslayer,” she barked, as they circled one another, each on their guard, waiting for the other to make a mistake.

“Oh, I will,” he grinned, lunging at her. She was, after all, a woman. How long would she last against a renowned swordsman, a celebrated knight like him? He could easily finish her off within minutes, seconds, if he did marginally better.

There was an ear-splitting clang of metal when their swords met. Drawing all his strength and recalling every trick he had learnt, he struck hard, aiming to kill, craving to draw blood. She parried the blow expertly, her timing so impeccable that he couldn’t help appreciating her. “Not bad,” he observed, taking a moment to catch his breath. “For a woman.”

And so they began. He moved into her, striking from every direction possible, raining blows on her, itching to kill. The wench proved to be more than an able match for him, blocking every attack and dodging each blow with a perfect combination of swordplay and footwork that matched his own. “You’re good,” he praised, albeit grudgingly. “Graceless, but good.” Nothing made him feel more alive than a challenging duel with an opponent worthy of his attention. Putting an end to this Brienne of Tarth would do a world of good for his confidence which lay dormant in Robb Stark’s dungeons for months.

Their dance went on for a while, with him attacking relentlessly and her warding off every strike with deft, effortless swings of her blade. When he lost focus, she attacked, managing to get to him twice, once with a minor scrape on his forehead, and the second time a nastier cut on his forearm. Soon, it was the other way round, and he was the one who had to defend himself. He began to tire. Malnourished, and his wrists still in chains, he realized that he was neither at the peak of his skills nor in the prime of his health, and it was beginning to show in his awkward movements which the wench appeared to be keen to take advantage of.

*She is stronger than I am!*

Frustrated, he gathered every bit of strength in his limbs and charged towards her, driving her away from the river, deeper into the woods. He managed to corner her, pinning against one of the trees.
She proved to be too agile for him and slipped away. He chased her, and once again they prowled like a pair of predators circling a common prey. His strength was fading fast and he had to act without wasting any more time or effort. Fortunately luck favoured him as she took a step backward, stumbling against an unforeseen rock, the obstacle taking her by surprise, distracting her from him. This was all the diversion he needed and his last chance. Before she could stabilize herself, he struck her hard on the thigh, piercing through her armour. One look at the grimace on her face and he knew that he had done considerable damage, the thin, dark trickle of blood that slowly oozed out filling him with utmost satisfaction. It was by no means a fatal blow, but deep enough to render her temporarily immobile and certainly good enough to boost his sagging self-esteem. Allowing her no time to recover, he stabbed her in the side, this time the blow much harder and the injury far worse than the earlier one. Her legs gave way and she slumped against the tree, clutching her abdomen in pain with her free hand.

Jaime laughed, a wicked triumphant laugh, savouring his first taste of victory in ages. The bloodlust in him had re-awakened. He had finally managed to overpower this brute of a woman.

“Yield,” he growled, gloating at the sight of the blood streaming down her right side as he stood over her, the tip of his blade on her neck. How long had it been since he had successfully brought down an adversary?

The wench said nothing, glaring at him as she lay on the ground, gasping for breath. He seized her sword and helped her to her feet as soon as he had disarmed her. “Unchain me,” he demanded, eager to get rid of the handcuffs that were still restricting his movements.

She paid no attention to him, collapsing to the ground again. She lay there, leaning against the tree, panting. He forced her to shed her armour, wanting to leave her with no defence. With the rope that had once bound him, he tied her to the trunk, tightly binding her arms and legs, wanting to take no chance. He bent down, crouching, so that he could look her in the eye. “Uncuff me,” he repeated, holding out his wrists. Having had a taste of her swordsmanship, he was careful to keep the sword to her throat, his injuries a painful reminder of what she was capable of. One wrong move or one lapse in judgement, he would lose his head. He knew he had to be wary of her movements.

“Do you take me for an idiot?” She spat, looking away from him.

“No,” he replied, his expression solemn. "But if you don’t, I’m going to kill you.” He pressed the edge of the blade to her arm until it drew blood.

She winced, her face once again contorted in pain. “I’m not going to succumb to your threats, Kingslayer,” she remained adamant, still refusing to look at him.

Jaime did some quick mental calculations. He knew that this woman wasn’t going to give in to him easily, he had to find an effective way to break her. There were only two paths to take from here. He could easily kill her within the next second and escape. He would have his freedom, no doubt, but without her, he had no access to the keys to free him and no time to search for them once she was dead. Alone and still chained until he found some means to break out of his cuffs, he was prone to capture with Robb Stark’s men still out there looking for him. He had just been a witness to her outstanding prowess in swordplay, and despite his hatred for her, he was impressed. Killing her without making good use of her would be an utter waste of her talent. With her by his side as his hostage, their strength would be doubled, so would his chances of making it to King’s Landing alive. It was worth a try.

Knowing no other means of persuasion, he decided to go the traditional Lannister way, putting to use the one trick his father had taught him right from when he was a boy. Bargaining always worked with everyone, in some way or the other. There wasn’t a single person alive without a weakness, and
Tywin Lannister had taught him how to take advantage of it. “Your being stubborn is not helping anyone, wench. This way, neither of us is going to benefit,” he began to negotiate, trying his luck with the Tarth woman. “I have a suggestion that would help us both.” He hoped she would take the bait. In the short time that he had spent with her, he had grown to know about her weakness and decided to make the most of it.

When she turned to him slowly, he knew he had her attention. She didn’t snap back at him or resist, which gave him the confidence to go on. “Why don’t we call a truce? You release me and come with me as my hostage to King’s Landing—”

“Are you out of your mind? What makes you think I’d comply?” She glared at him. If looks could kill, he would be dead by now.

“Allow me to finish.” He maintained his composure. “You come with me to King’s Landing and in return, I will give you my word that the Stark girls would be safe. You are free to leave with them once I am back home safely. I will, myself, send you back to Riverrun with them.”

“You expect me to take your word? The word of an oathbreaker?” Her eyes flashed with fury. “I’m never going to cut you loose, Kingslayer. You might as well leave me here to die for your own good.”

“Do you have a choice?” he continued, coming to the crux of his plan. “If you don’t release me, I’m going to kill you. And with you dies your vow to Catelyn Stark. Anything could happen to the girls after you’re gone.” He paused to study her reaction. “Would you really want them to face the consequences of your stupidity?”

“You cannot harm them,” she protested feebly, seeing no way out other than to accept his offer.

“Their fate is not entirely in my hands, but it could be if you want,” he enticed her further. “Do you want to be known as an oathbreaker as well? Do you wish to join my league? I’m an honourless man, but I know there is honour in you, wench.” He had gauged her enough by now to know that she would fall for this. The honourable woman that she was, she would never break her word to Catelyn Stark. “Who would take Sansa and Arya back to their mother if you happened to die in these woods today? I could kill you right now and go my way, but I don’t want to. Lady Stark would have expected you to do better than die at my hands.”

Brienne still refused to believe him. “What is in it for you?” She looked at him carefully, her deep blue eyes boring into his. “Why are you so interested in keeping me alive? Why not kill me and move on with it?”

“Because you’ll protect me, wench, just as you had promised Lady Catelyn. Alone, in my currently vulnerable state, the chances of my survival are low. With you by my side, things could be better. You will see to it that I reach King’s Landing safely,” he went on, unfolding his plan. “Only this time, the roles would be reversed. We continue the journey, but on my terms. So before it’s too late, why don’t you unlock my hands and let me cuff your wrists instead—”

She looked at him incredulously. “How can I protect you with my hands chained?”

“Oh, you’re bloody brilliant, wench, I’ve seen you fight.” Jaime complimented her unwillingly. “Even with your wrists bound, you’re more than a match for most of your opponents. That’s good enough for me.”

“I’m surprised you trust me to go quietly with you,” she tried a last bid attempt to intimidate him.
“I don’t,” Jaime admitted. “Why is why you go handcuffed. If you choose to act smart, you’re going to end up with this sword through your heart, and with you ends any chance of survival for the girls.” His heart soared and his spirits rose as he saw her cringe at his suggestion. “You’re the hostage now, Brienne of Tarth, and I am the captor. You might as well get used to it.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Now having the upper hand, Jaime tries to show off his authority

So this was what being in the presence of the formidable Ser Jaime Lannister felt like! Wasted away by months of confinement, the renowned knight was reduced to a ghost of his former glory. His famous good looks once the talk of the seven kingdoms, he looked pathetic now, worse than the dirtiest beggar on the streets. Foul smelling, filthy and unkempt, his breath reeked of alcohol, while from his rags wafted an unbearable stench of piss and shit. It took Brienne a great deal of self control not to throw up at the sight of him. She felt like hitting her head on the tree she was tethered to until she bled to death. But what good was her death to anyone? While it would rid her of the captivity along with the acquaintance of the most abominable creature she had ever had the misfortune to meet, such a death held no honour. On the contrary, she would be labelled a coward for having sought an escape from the word she had given to the woman whose family she had sworn to protect. Her repulsion for him apart, she had to accept that the man was every inch the skilled warrior he was made out to be. Her own experience was good enough an evidence for it.

“So what will it be?” He made her his offer again, his voice now bearing an edge of impatience coupled with intolerance. “The blade—” he brushed the tip of the sword against her throat “—or the chains? Come on, pick one, my lady. I don’t have all day to sit here and chat with you.” The way he unnecessarily stressed on ‘lady’ made her want to wring his neck.

Unflinched even as blade pressed into her skin, she defiantly faced the other side, not wanting to give him the pleasure of an easy victory. She wasn’t one of those dainty, delicate women who swooned for the silliest reasons. Made of steel and of solid resolve, she was no lady. Sooner or later, she was determined to prove that to him. Besides, she could do better than be forced to look into his disgusting face at such close quarters. Why did the gods punish her with such a despicable companion?

“Don’t look away from me when I’m talking to you, wench,” he hissed, gritting his teeth. He slowly began sliding the blade up her neck, while being careful enough not to cut her. Bringing the tip to rest under her chin, he tilted her face towards him. “I asked you something to which I expect an answer.”

Brienne had to give in and bring herself to face those green eyes for fear of ending up with her throat slit. “Have it your way,” she conceded reluctantly, every inch of her still bleeding leg throbbing in excruciating pain. “But on one condition.”

He narrowed his eyes, throwing her a look of suspicion. “Go on, spit it out.”

“I want you to swear,” she insisted, risking a try though she knew he would refuse. “On your sister, your father, your brother and every Lannister dear to you that you would release the girls and send them with me should I comply with your demands.”

“Even if I do, would you trust the words of a man with shit for honour?” His expression was now keen, as if he were mentally scrutinizing her.
He definitely seemed to be a master of words. She was in a dilemma of what to do, unsure of why she was wasting time with him when she didn’t know if he would keep his promise, if that was a promise. But she had no other way out. “Kingslayer—”

“Jaime,” he corrected, once again visibly disturbed with the usage of his infamous nickname. “Or Ser Jaime, if you please.” Surprisingly, for a man so full of treachery that he had to kill the one he was sworn to protect in such a cowardly manner, he seemed overly sensitive of this title. For a man who saw no shame in bedding his own flesh and blood and impregnating her with his bastards, how did a small thing like this matter to the extent of provoking him so much?

“Give me a chance to stop calling you Kingslayer, Kingslayer.” She relished repeating it just for the cheap pleasure of watching the discomfort on his face.

“You may call me what you want,” he shot back, his eyes blazing. “I am not obliged to swear anything to you. I have already given you my word. That’s all there is, take it or die.”

Knowing she had no other solution to the predicament that she had brought upon herself thanks to her carelessness, she nodded slowly.

“Is that a yes?” He leaned closer, peering at her.

“Yes,” she whispered, hoping he would move away from her. The stench of the stale alcohol in his breath was making her nauseous.

“That’s the best thing you’ve said so far, my lady,” he drawled, lowering the sword, his anger dissipating as quickly as it had shown up. He was back to his usual arrogant, condescending self. “If you can be called a lady. I prefer wench, though, suits you better,” he added snarkily. Now, give me the keys to these chains,” he demanded, stretching his hand.

The keys were on her, under her tunic, fastened to the gold chain around her neck. She would die before she let him touch her with his dirty hands. “Release me, and I’ll give them to you.”

“I’m no fool,” he said shortly. “Tell me where it is and I’ll take it myself. Unless…” The sword was back to her throat.

“Repeatedly spewing out empty threats to kill me is beginning to rapidly lose its charm, Kingslayer,” she said acrimoniously, sounding far more confident than she actually was. “If you really wished to get rid of me you would’ve done so long back.”

“Oh, I don’t want to kill you.” He grinned, baring his yellowing teeth. “The choice is yours.”

She hesitated, quickly thinking of how to prevent him from forcing himself on her.

“Hurry up, woman,” he urged, his grin fading and the impatience in his tone growing by the minute. “Unless you prefer to have me strip you naked and search every inch of your—”

“Shut up!” she growled, trying to throttle the sudden fear that gripped her. Now that she was in his custody, come nightfall, would he try to rape her? Bound and probably gagged at his disposal, he would be free to do anything to her. She cringed at the thought of the most inhuman human forcing himself inside her, taking her maidenhead and defiling her honour. She would gladly die before it came to that, but what was the point? She would be of no help to the ones she had sworn to protect.

He sneered at her discomposure. “I might have to do that. How do I know that you haven’t a weapon down there?” His eyes dropped to her breeches, sending a chill through her body as she imagined him frisking her all over. But to her relief, he didn’t act on his ominous threat. “I’m sure
these were the only two weapons you had, else you would have killed me by now,” he said confidently. “Now for the keys.” His tone was crisp and business like. “Where are they?”

“Fastened to the chain around my neck.” Her voice had reduced to its lowest and her vulnerability was completely unmasked as she was totally at his mercy. Forced out of her armour when she was tied up, she felt unclothed and exposed. “Untie me and I’ll take them out for you, I swear, I won’t attack--”

“I’ll take them myself.” His eyes were fixed on hers, the expression in them rekindling her fear. He made a sudden movement, leaning towards her and clutching the front of her jerkin as if to rip it open. Her heart thundering loudly, she tensed, recoiling instinctively, but could retreat no farther than the barrier of the tree trunk. She had half a mind to ram her head into him, to hurt him as much as possible, but decided against it. He still had the sword and it wasn’t worth the risk. Closing her eyes, she turned away, resigned to the disgusting fate that was in store for her. She sat still, dreading the moment when he would touch her where no man ever had, the woman in her desperately hoping for something to stop him.

Brienne waited but nothing came, except an ear splitting roar of laughter by her side. Turning to him, she noticed that he had backed away, keeping a safe distance from her. “Fear me not, wench, I was only jesting,” he said, taking in the look of shocked relief in her eyes. “I allowed myself the privilege of a bit of fun. Nothing was more satisfying than watching you cower at my threat.”

“I’m sure that was quite entertaining,” she said coldly, appalled that he would play such a cruel joke on her nerves.

“Of course, particularly when you thought that that I would--” he stopped laughing. “As if I would dream of coming anywhere near you given a choice. I have no interest in a hideous creature like you. Since the day I first set eyes upon you I’ve been pondering and deliberating if you even are a woman.” He paused, enjoying his nasty joke. “I’ve been faithful to one woman all my life and she is all there ever will be in my life.”

“I have no words to express what a relief that is!” she muttered under her breath.

Jaime’s gaze wandered to her chest and she immediately felt naked, more like a woman than she ever had in her life. “You call that a bosom?” he questioned mockingly. “That’s by no standards a woman’s chest. I’ve seen boys with breasts bigger than that,” he exaggerated.

Paying no attention to his snide remark, she sat still as he cut the cords off her injured hand, freeing her just enough for her to pull out her chain. His eyes were incessantly on her and the sword back to her throat as she worked on the chain, unfastening the keys from it. When she tossed him the keys, he awkwardly unlocked his cuffs, struggling for a while but eventually succeeding after a great deal of effort, following it up with the chains that bound his feet and torso.

Within minutes, he had transferred the manacles to her, binding her in a death grip. “That’s much better.” He rubbed his wrist in satisfaction and stretched his arms to savour his new-found freedom. “Now, I want to make it across to the other side before it gets dark, so it’s time for us to be on the move.” Cutting down the rest of the ropes that bound her to the trunk, he set her free and pulled her to her feet.

Unable to bear his touch, she shoved him away, elbowing him in the ribs and knocking him down as an additional measure. “I said, I’ll come with you, so you might as well believe me,” she lashed out in fury.

“Careful, wench,” he warned as he shuffled to his feet. Grasping her arm again, he led her towards
the riverbank. “Do not forget who is in charge here. You’re a woman, and unarmed.”

“Not long ago you were almost defeated by a woman, Kingslayer. I don’t need a sword, I can kill you with my bare hands,” she said gruffly, cursing her fate that she couldn’t strangle the life out of him even if presented with a suitable opportunity. “Just try setting me free and--”

“I have no doubt you can do that.” He smirked, his grip on her hand now so tight that it hurt for it was the same arm he had wounded. “Which is why I prefer having you manacled.” Having said that, he released his hold on her and jabbed her in the back with the hilt of the sword, prompting her to walk.

“Are you not going to tie me up?” she asked, spotting the ropes strewn on the ground.

“Not necessary,” he said with a smug smile on his lips as he glanced down at her wounded thigh. “Even if you try to escape, you won’t go far with that leg. A lone, unarmed and injured woman is an open invitation to rapists. If I were you, I’d stay with me. We're much safer with each other.”

*How do I know that you’re not going to rape me?* From the beginning of her captivity and more so after his crude prank, the nagging insecurity was eating her, though she could do nothing about it except walk with him in silence.

Only when she began putting her legs to use did Brienne realize the intensity of the pain in her thigh. Jaime seemed to be careful not to touch her without reason, and once or twice she stumbled, but before he could support her, she dragged herself back to her feet subjecting the injured limb to added pressure, aggravating the pain. She didn’t want her helplessness to be visible on her face, she didn’t want the Kingslayer to think of her as a weakling, she didn’t want to give him the joy of winning over a bloody woman.

“In,” he ordered, gesturing to the boat when they had made it to the bank.

She was about to step inside, when her leg gave way and she lost balance. Wincing, she stumbled, nearly falling into the water through the gap, when he caught her.

“Get your filthy hands off me, Kingslayer.” She pushed him away roughly and got into the boat by herself, gritting her teeth and bearing the pain.

“I don’t want you dead, or worse still, crippled by the time we get back,” he retorted, equally angry. “You’re under my protection. What would Lord Selwyn say if anything were to happen to you? After all you’re his--”

“I appreciate your heartfelt concern for my health, but I’d rather wish you stayed away from me,” she cut across, sounding as icy as she could. “I can take care of myself, and my father is well aware of that.” She had no interest in listening to taunts about her father next.

Dropping the argument, they settled down at opposite ends. Picking up the oars, he began rowing, his eyes constantly fixed in her direction. He did say he wasn’t interested in her body which was unsurprising for no man ever was, but their situation was different. She was his hostage and he could do anything just to prove his authority over her. What if he tried to--she didn’t trust him and the way he looked at her made her feel all the more uncomfortable. Was he mentally undressing her every time his eyes were on her? She squirmed at that thought and distracted herself by looking out into the distance as they set sail along the Trident. Reclining, she closed her eyes, craving some rest. That way, she wouldn’t have to punish herself with the sight of the monster in front of her.

“You should see me on one of my better days,” he said proudly, jolting her out of the inner peace she
was trying to bring herself. “I am quite handsome, wench.” He smiled, a smile that could have been charming had he not been so vile and full of contempt for her. “Or so they say.”

Brienne clicked her tongue in disapproval, knowing better than than to reply, for entertaining any conversation with him would only fuel his arrogance. She turned to the side and immersed herself in the sights around her, taking in the once-existent civilizations they passed, villages totally wasted in the war, most of them devoid of people who were probably dead or had to flee. The only humans they came across were a stray one or two or at the most a handful here and there.

Unbidden and despite trying to divert herself with her surroundings, her mind went back to her captor. In her younger years, she had heard her father mention Jaime a few times, the stories of his looks and valour reaching Tarth as well. She recalled that when she was all but sixteen years of age, maidens around her sang songs about him, dreaming worthless dreams about marrying a handsome knight like him, a wealthy prince of his status. Unaffected by all such girlish fantasies, Brienne’s only passion was to train to become a knight as worthy and as chivalrous as any man could be. She knew it would be a challenge in this man made world, but that didn’t deter her from putting in her best efforts.

“Brienne of Tarth,” he began again, drawing her attention to him. “You’re the only surviving heir to your father, aren’t you?”

“Why bother asking when you already know everything about me?”

Ignoring her, he went on. “I’m sure your father must be rueing his fate,” he said slowly, searching her face for a reaction as he spoke. “His son gone, with his last living child being the daughter he must have regretted siring.”

She bit the inside of her cheek, for he had touched a nerve.

“One who is neither the woman she was born as, nor the man she craves to be,” he put it accurately, his eyes dancing with malevolence. “Tell me, my lady--” he smirked, halting for effect. “--or should I call you ser, or--” there was another short pause punctuated by a wicked look he seemed to have solely reserved for her “--I do not know how to address unfortunate souls who are neither men nor women--”

He stopped when she got to her feet abruptly, the boat swaying with the impact.

“Calm down, wench,” he pacified her, not losing his composure for even a second. “Learn to take a joke.” Realizing that the boat might capsize, she went back to her seat, her face flushed, anger flooding through her entire body. Unaffected by her demeanour, he still had the faint mocking smile on his lips. “Are you always this angry?”

“Killing you would appease my anger, Kingslayer.” She glared at him, her tone soft and menacing. “If you wish, I could do you that honour.”

“Ah, but you forget one important thing.” He grinned. “That wouldn’t help you with your vow,” he reminded her in an irritating sing-song tone.

They continued in silence for a while with Jaime rowing quietly but never taking his eyes off her. Once the anger inside her had ebbed, the pain was back, reminding her of her rapidly deteriorating leg. Brienne gazed at the water, watching the fish swim by, using the distraction to forget the pain and stiffness in her leg.

“If I remember correctly, you’ve been betrothed in the past,” he started again. “Thrice, was it? Or
was it a half a dozen times—"

“How does it matter to you?”

He raised his hands in surrender. “I’m just trying to get to know you better. So tell me, wench, were those men blind?”

When she chose not to answer him, he went on relentlessly, determined to torture her. “I know how it ended.” He gave her a knowing smile. “You did everything you could to escape marriage, didn’t you? Particularly with the last one, the old man—”

“How do you know so much about me?” This time, she was honestly surprised.

“You fight well,” he complimented her again, the reluctance in his tone evident. “Who taught you?”

“Ser Goodwyn,” she replied, recalling those days. “Since then my father stopped searching for a suitable match for me.” She stopped, cursing herself for confessing her life’s most personal moments to her adversary, the man she loathed from the bottom of her heart.

“I don’t blame the men who tried and backed away.” Jaime went back to his usual snark after the fleeting moment of respect which was perhaps a mistake he just realized. “I would never marry someone like you even if I was compelled into it with a sword held against my neck.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I share your sentiments, Kingslayer,” she bounced back. “No respectable woman in her senses would marry an honourless man like you.”

“Women throw themselves at me all the time. But—” he paused, his eyes wandering over her from top to toe “How would you know? You bear no womanly traits nor emotions. If I ever marry, it’ll only be Cersei.” He gazed away dreamily, lost in memories.

“We’ve made it,” she called his attention to the land they were approaching, silently thanking the interruption to his non-stop nonsense.

Jaime got out and held out a hand to her. Ignoring him, she climbed on to the bank, inadvertently putting her entire weight on her bad leg. She grimaced, almost sinking to her knees, the injury worsening every second.

“Need help?” He stood there, waiting for her to get up, his hand still stretched out in her direction.

“I’m fine,” she grunted, standing up with great difficulty.

Once again they trudged along the dense forest paths for hours, occasionally meeting a corpse or two decaying and rotting, with the crows feasting on it. From time to time, Brienne halted for a few seconds to catch her breath, finding it increasingly impossible to walk with each passing minute. But she had resolved not to speak about it. She wasn’t frail.

After staying quiet for an unusually long time, Jaime went back to his talkative self. “Were you pledged to Stannis?” he asked.

“Gods, no!” she gasped, shuddering at the thought.

“Ah, Renly.” His tone became condescending as he went on to unleash a barrage of insults about Renly.

“You will not insult him.” Brienne felt herself blush and to her dismay, that did not go unnoticed.
“Gods, you fancied him!” he exclaimed, amused.

“I did not fancy him,” she denied vehemently.

“Of course you did,” he continued, embarrassing her further. “But I’m afraid you were not his type. He preferred curly haired little girls like Loras Tyrell, you were far too much man for him—”

“I’m not interested in foul rumours,” she cut in, not wishing to let him bad-mouth Renly any further.

But Jaime seemed to revel in it. “His proclivities were the worst kept secrets in court. It’s a shame the throne wasn’t made out of cocks, they would never have got him off it—”

Blinded by a surge of uncontrollable rage, Brienne grabbed his arm violently. “Shut your mouth,” she said, seething in anger, for a moment forgetting that it was he who was armed and in control.

Jaime leaned into her, his face barely inches away from hers. “I don’t blame him,” he breathed, his lips hovering so close to hers that she could once again smell his rancid breath. “And I don’t blame you either. We don’t get to choose who we love.” He made no attempt to fend her off or free himself, and for a while they both stood there, panting heavily and glaring at one another, each wishing nothing more than to cut the other to pieces.

Calming down once her breathing had returned to normal, Brienne released her hold on him. They moved on, with Jaime just a few steps ahead of her when she crashed to the ground, succumbing to the shooting pain in her leg. She had known from the start that the cut was deep, but had not anticipated it to be this severe.

“Wench,” she heard Jaime call out as he retraced his steps back to her. He kneeled by her side, grabbing her arm.

The last thing she saw was the concerned look in his eyes as the world around her faded. It cannot be concern, she thought, her eyelids fluttering shut. Why in the name of the seven will the Kingslayer bother if I’m dead or alive?
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Jaime is confused as he tries to face his inner conflicts.

Unable to shake away the impact of his latest confrontation with the wench, Jaime was filled with nothing but scorn for pretty boy Renly. Without bothering to wait for her, he carried on, wondering if keeping her alive was a big mistake, thinking to what extent would he have to tolerate her singing praises of the man she fancied. If there existed anyone who deserved none of it, it was that bloody cunt.

A loud thud behind him brought him to a halt, jolting him out of his musings. Turning around, he found his companion lying on the ground in a lifeless heap.

"Wench!" He backtracked, rushing towards her and crouching by her side, watching her helplessly as the blue eyes fluttered shut after one last look at him. He pressed his fingers to her throat, relieved to find a pulse. _She’s alive_. For a while, he sat there, bemused at the sight of her sorry state. He had been counting on her support to tackle their adversaries. What he had not anticipated, was to stand by and watch her collapse like a frail woman. The great lumbering beast that she appeared to be, was she so delicate that she couldn’t withstand even the slightest of the injuries inflicted by a thoroughly weakened man at half his actual strength?

“Come on, woman,” he muttered, tapping her cheek vigorously in a crudely desperate attempt to revive her. “Open your eyes. I can’t drag you around all the way--” he froze, his mind filling with horror at the vision of him hauling her all along, or worse still carrying her. She must weigh atleast a ton, he estimated, slightly exaggerating as he took in her massive frame. On the other hand, a nagging feeling that she might succumb to her wounds began pinching a remote corner of his mind. Not that he was really bothered about her fate, but this was an injury inflicted by him, and while he detested her from the bottom of his heart, the guilt of unnecessary deaths was not something he looked forward to. He was a knight, and there still were the last vestiges of chivalry left in him, though the world may perceive him otherwise. That said, her death would only curtail his chances of survival. She was his last resort to getting back to Cersei, and there was nothing more he wanted than to be back in the arms of the woman he loved.

Jaime looked up at the sky, the sun was fast fading, and within hours twilight would set in, restricting any further travel for the day. If he wanted to do something, he had to make haste. Gripping her under the arms, he hauled her towards a tree and lay her there with her back against the trunk. Her head drooped to her chest for want of support, and in this position, she did appear to be a lot more vulnerable than the formidable warrior she projected herself to be. For the first time since he had divested her of the armour, Jaime allowed himself to take a good, proper look at her. As he appraised her broad shoulders, her almost non-existent breasts and the neck as thick as the tree trunk she was resting against, he concluded that she had none of the characteristics of the sex the gods had chosen for her.

Examining the dark blot on her thigh which had now festered badly since he had blessed her with it, he realized that this was not a thing that could be dealt with easily. A sickly green liquid was oozing out of the wound and spreading across the area, and mixed with the dried blood, it looked awful. The
sight of it, and the putrid odour that it was now beginning to let off almost made his stomach bring
up the contents of his last meal. No stranger to such wounds, he knew enough to decide that the
longer he stalled, the lesser were the chances of her leg being saved. A good clean death is any day
more merciful, he thought, shuddering at the idea of her leg being chopped off. Crippling this
woman would be such a waste of her talent, the destruction of the very essence of her existence, and
no matter how much he hated her, he couldn’t allow her to be reduced to such a state. She needed
the attention of a maester, and quickly, if he had any intention of keeping her intact.

He scanned his surroundings, desperately searching for some means to get out of this sticky situation.
In the dense forest where not a soul could be heard, where would he seek assistance? Soon it would
be dark, and he knew not what creatures roamed the woods, what dangers they were heading
towards, for he was not accustomed to travelling the forests on foot, with no means of defence, but a
sword. Even if he did manage to make camp before dusk, single handedly protecting both of them
was beyond his capacity. Squinting, he gazed into the distance, his mind racing, working quickly
towards a solution. They were a few miles away from the nearest entry to the Kingsroad, and if his
knowledge of the Riverlands could be trusted, there ought to be an inn at a junction their route would
lead them to. They could seek shelter for the night, and he was sure to find a maester there who
could tend to her wounds.

His eyes fell on her saddlebag which lay a few feet away, its contents strewn across the ground when
she had fallen, and among the various items it had once housed, was a skin of water. That could
help, at least for the time being. Grabbing it, he sprinkled a few drops on her face, hoping she would
wake up.

His effort was rewarded when he found himself staring into the bluest pair of eyes he had ever seen,
eyes the colour of the sky above him, and as vivid as the beautiful sapphire he remembered seeing on
his mother’s finger. Her face bore a shadow of confusion, and as the wench took in her surroundings
and the sight of Jaime squatting by her side, her expression cleared, leading to the familiar look of
disgust and resentment that she seemed to have reserved solely for him.

“You’re alive,” he remarked, not knowing what else to say. A civil conversation with his enemy was
not something he was looking forward to. “You’ve been out for long--”

“Don’t you wish I were dead, Kingslayer?” she croaked. He throat apparently dry, she seemed to be
struggling to get the words out. “Don’t you dare come any closer,” she barked, when he leaned in to
feed her some water. “I don’t want your fake sympathy.”

“Suit yourself,” he said angrily, thrusting the skin into her hands, splashing water all over her muddy
jerkin. “I have no idea what gives you the bloody impression that I’m out to touch you at every
chance available. Do understand, wench--” he narrowed his eyes, fuming, searching for the foulest
words his mind could throw at her “--no man, even half as pretty as me would ever dream of laying
even a finger on you.” At that, she seemed to thaw, her rage giving way to… was that pain in her
eyes as she digested the insult? He watched in satisfaction as she shrank against the tree sipping the
water, a submissive demeanour taking over the mulish arrogance that was so fucking getting on his
nerves. He didn’t want to know if he had hurt her, nor did he care a damn. All he wanted, was to
bestow her with the most scathing insults that could grace his tongue, to destroy her self-esteem and
stubborn over-confidence to the greatest extent possible, but to his irritation, he was unable to come
up with any at the moment.

Neither of them said a word after that, he, because of disinterest in any interaction, and she, for the
sheer lack of strength in her. She sat there, leaning against the tree with her eyes shut, her chest
heaving as she struggled to regain her lost vigour. Tired of being the constant target of her relentless
disdain, and having little else to do, Jaime drew his sword, making up his mind to gainfully utilize the
time. Having almost forgotten what it felt like to wield a weapon, he spent a few seconds simply
letting his mind absorb the feel of his fingers around the hilt, enjoying what he had missed all along.
He began swinging it around, practising his moves after what seemed like eternity. He was sorely out
of touch, but, gods, it was so enervating! He was alive, his life force back inside him after ages.
Nothing managed to get him more aroused than a good session of fucking or fighting, many a times
both. Deprived of either for almost a year, he was reduced to a walking, talking corpse, out of tune
with the world as soon as he was released. But now that he had his hands on a sword, he was a man
again. He felt whole! Speaking of fucking, I do miss Cersei, he pined, as he ached for his sister’s
cunt. And here I am, stuck with this stupid, headstrong wench for company.

The rustling of leaves by the tree drew his attention back to her. “I’m fine now,” she grunted, shifting
uncomfortably in her position and looking anything but fine. “We have to make haste. Staying here
for long would only invite trouble.”

“Very well.” He shrugged, knowing better than to counter her suggestion. Besides, the sooner they
got out of here, the better. “We have to leave the forest before dark and take the Kingsroad--”

“We’re not far from Harrenhal.” The wench decided to offer her opinion, forgetting her pain for the
moment. “You do know that Lord Bolton holds Harrenhal, and the Kingsroad--”

“Yes,” Jaime cut across, miffed at being taken for an idiot. “I’m taking a calculated risk here. I also
know that Roose Bolton and his Northmen are most likely keeping a close watch on the Trident and
the Kingsroad, and I am well aware of the perils that lie along that route. But we have no choice but
to head in that direction. That long stretch there--” he pointed to a narrow winding pathway among
the dense foliage that someone had carved out for the benefit of travellers “--will lead us out of here.
There’s an inn a few miles from here, just before we meet the road. We can break the journey there
for the night.”

I’m doing this for you, woman, so you might as well stop asking unnecessary questions and show me
some due consideration.

Surprised that she didn’t counter-question his decision, he waited, watching her keenly while
continuing to maintain a safe distance from her. She winced, gingerly trying to get to her feet with
the support of the tree. But the moment she attempted balancing herself without the aid of the trunk,
she crumpled to the ground, groaning in pain.

“Are you sure you can walk?” Jaime dropped to his knees, reaching out to examine her leg.

She jerked away like a tortoise withdrawing into its shell, folding her legs close to her chest before he
could touch her, her face contorted with pain at the sudden movement. “I told you, I’m fine,” she
said brusquely, ignoring her agony.

Her cold behaviour only infuriated him further. Not my problem if she decides to be immature. Let
her go to hell or wherever else she feels like. “Fine,” he relented, giving up any effort to help her. He
bent down to gather the contents of the saddlebag, repacking it. “I’m ready to leave,” he said,
returning his sword back to its position on his waist.

Yet again, she scrambled to her feet, only to stumble as she took a step forward after relinquishing
her hold on the tree. This time Jaime caught her by the waist before she could collapse. “Careful,
wench.” He steadied her, hoisting her to her feet. “Lean against me and take one slow step at a time,”
he instructed, not wanting her condition to worsen.

“Get away--” The inherent obstinate personality in her taking over her acute physical distress, she
tried to push him away, struggling in his arms to extricate herself.
But this time Jaime decided to be sensible. “Don’t be a fool,” he scolded, tightening his hold on her. “We can’t afford to aggravate your already pitiful condition any further. We can find you a maester once we make it to the inn.”

They had, but moved a few short steps, when he was subjected to the punishment of her critical onslaught again. “Do I sense a hint of concern?” she mocked, her voice dripping with sarcasm despite the strain from the movement which was nearly killing her. “Does the Kingslayer have a heart?” He felt his face burn, for she had hit a sore spot, and his visibly disturbed reaction only egged her on. “Blackened, though it may be, by virtue of his crimes.”

There she goes… Kingslayer again. Jaime detested that word, and more so when it spilled from her mouth. He hated it every time she relished an opportunity to touch upon his crimes. Fighting hard to keep his composure, he resisted the growing urge to strangle her with his bare hand… if only the thick column of her neck could indeed be snapped, which of course, he wasn’t sure about. “It’s called chivalry, wench!” he remarked, mimicking her caustic tone and infusing his voice with the maximum possible bitterness he could. “Alas,” he said, in mock pity. “How would you know? You’re no knight to have saved anyone yourself, nor a fair maiden who ever had to be rescued.”

The woman bit her chapped lip, drawing blood, and turned red at his remark, whether in rage or in embarrassment, he knew not, he cared not. She was his responsibility, not her emotions or her feelings. “Rescue?” she hissed, returning to her usual poisonous self. She seems to be as thick skinned as she’s ugly, for mockery just seems to bounce off her. Paying her no attention, he took another step forward, but she stopped him, tugging at his arm, forcing him to face her. At such close proximity and angle, her face appeared broader and even more grotesque than before. “You call this a rescue, Kingslayer?”

In a sudden, impulsive move, he released her from his hold, wordlessly challenging her to stand upright without his help. If she can’t stand me touching her, she might as well find a way to walk by herself. Taken aback by his abrupt withdrawal, she held out her hand to reach for the tree, which was now far behind them, way beyond her reach. “Damn!” he heard her curse under her breath at the realization that there was nothing there for her to hold on to, except him. Giving up trying to balance herself on one leg, she staggered, clutching his sleeve for support, ripping his rags with the force she extended when she shifted her entire weight on him.

Jaime, however, didn’t budge. “What would you call this then?” he asked, glancing down to her hand on his arm, but making no attempt to steady her this time. “You fucking fainted like a dainty little girl sometime back, and I had to revive you.” He was annoyed by her lack of recognition for his actions. “Here I am, half-carrying you to safety, so yes, my dear woman, it is a rescue. The least I want is some cooperation from you, and not this high handed dismissal of my efforts.” He stared into those eyes, and something in them made him uncomfortable this time. He looked away, deciding to observe her face instead, for it would benefit him to target his next bout of criticism at it. A good portion of her broad, homely face was covered in freckles, her broken nose and her crooked teeth only adding to the overall lack of femininity. For a rare fleeting moment, he couldn’t help pitying her for just existing as the hideous and pathetic creature that she was. Ending up dead would be better than living on with a face no eye in this world wanted to look at.

“What did you expect? A little bow or a curtsy?” she asked, her normally musical voice laced with bitterness. “I’ve been reduced to this state of helplessness thanks to you.” She threw him a look of contempt. “I’m surprised you expect me to trust you after everything you’ve subjected me to.”

“I beat you fair and square, like a true knight would,” he retorted, glaring at her. “Why are you still clinging to me if I’m that untrustworthy.”
She continued glaring at him for a few seconds, her intense eyes boring holes into his. She suddenly let go of him, forcing herself to walk by her own. She did manage a few ungainly feet, but when her legs eventually caved in, she had to surrender to the unavoidable fall. As much as he wished to stand by and let her suffer, Jaime was unable to do so, and this time as well, he found himself rushing to her aid, holding her before she could touch the earth.

“Then let me be, leave me here to rot,” she objected in a small voice, clearly lacking the conviction and the confidence to manage on her own anymore. “Why help me if you think I’m clingy?”

*I’m unable to comprehend that, myself.*

“Because you’re better off alive for me,” he said, uncuffing her wrists, while leaving the other chains as they were. For some reason, she now cooperated with him, winding her arm around his neck and allowing him to support her, as they trudged along, one slow step at a time.

The pair ambled on for what seemed like eternity, their pace drastically reduced because of her injury. From time to time, Jaime glanced up at the sky, the rapidly waning sunlight filling him with a foreboding sense of doom. He had to make a great deal of effort not to snap at her for slowing them down, for her dependency on him had reduced her to a hindrance in his quest for freedom. Every now and then when they encountered corpses in various stages of decay, Jaime shifted them around with his sword, clearing the way for them, until they came upon the mutilated bodies of three women hanging from a tree with a crude sign around their necks. Wondering who could have massacred them so ruthlessly, he stopped to take a proper look at them.

_They lay with lions,_ he read the sign aloud for the benefit of the wench.

“That’s inhuman,” she said, looking up at them in distaste. “A quick death would anyday be more chivalrous. Whoever did that...” She stopped, clenching her fist in fury.

“Tavern wenches. I suppose, they served my father’s soldiers,” he observed, immediately identifying the men responsible for their deaths. “Those were Stark men who did this,” he announced viciously, stealing a glance at her face for a reaction.

“I don’t serve the Starks,” she asserted, her face reddening. “I serve Lady Catelyn--”

“--who obviously didn’t know you were such a weakling. Had she known that things would take a turn with you being a nuisance to me, she might have entrusted this responsibility to another,” he couldn’t help mocking. That came out harsher than he had intended it to be, but he had to vent out his frustration somewhere. Thanks to her, time was running out, and they had barely made any progress. “A little prick off a blade from a man severely out of practice, and here you are, limping like a green squire, slowing us down--”

She stopped abruptly. “If you think I’m such a burden to you, why bother?” she lashed out. “Why don’t you just leave me here to die?”

_Enough of her nonsense._ “I might consider doing that,” he argued back. “If you keep criticizing--”

“Go on, then,” she said, raising her voice. “If you think I’m a worthless piece of shit--”

Jaime pricked up his ears, sensing a distant movement. “Shhh,” he urged her to shut up. For good measure, he clamped a palm to her mouth, silencing her. “Hooves,” he whispered, concentrating on the faint sound that seemed to be getting louder by the second. Spotting a dense clump of bushes a couple of feet to their left, he dragged her along, the two of them crouched under the cover of the green, waiting for their intruders to show up. When they were safely hidden, he released her from his
He sat still, watching, as a lone horseman came into view. Just one, he observed, silently peering through the gap in the bushes, likely, separated from his companions. “That’s one of your king’s men,” he said, his voice loud enough to be audible to the wench by his side, but soft enough not to be heard a foot away.

The man got off his horse, scanning the area for signs of movement. “He heard us,” Jaime hissed, quickly thinking about his next action if they were caught.

What happened after that was something Jaime had never anticipated. “Help, the Kingslayer!” The wench yelled at the top of her voice, pushing him out of their cover and into the line of vision of their prospective attacker. Scrambling to her feet, she tried to get away, but with her leg once again betraying her and her chains impeding her even more, she could do nothing but stay still.

What the hell…?

Momentarily numbed by her act of treachery, Jaime didn’t know whether to tackle the stranger first, or deal with her. But that decision was not his to make, for the man strode towards him, drawing his blade.

“Finally,” he said, looking Jaime up and down. “The mighty Kingslayer at my mercy.” He took in Jaime’s weakened state. “Not so mighty, after all.”

Deciding not to take a chance, Jaime lunged at him, pouring into the attack every bit of strength he had. Knocking his opponent down, he pinned him to the ground, restraining his sword hand.

Stunned by the surprise move, the man took some time to react, making an effort to free his hand a little too late. Though his reflexes were considerably dulled after the confinement, Jaime was ready by now and too quick for his assailant. Pulling out his sword before his opponent could do anything, he struck him hard, straight through the heart, blood splattering on his face as the blade pierced through the man’s chest, killing him instantly.

For a while, he sat on the man, staring at the pool of blood that was slowly spreading around the body, savouring his first proper kill after ages.

“Now, that’s what I call a quick death,” he muttered to himself, panting. Getting off the corpse, he directed his attention to the woman waiting for him in the bushes.

Wiping his blood-covered face with his sleeve, he reached her in two quick strides. “Why?” he asked, kneeling by her side, his voice full of spite. “I tried to help you, wench, I wanted to keep you alive.” He had half a mind to strike her down with the bloody sword in his hand. One more kill wouldn’t matter much. “I thought you were honourable, that you would stand by your promise--”

“I made you no promise,” she shot back with equal venom. “Remember what you told me before we were interrupted? You called me a nuisance, a hindrance to your escape--”

“So?”

“If you abandoned me and left me to die here, what would become of the girls? They need me to be alive, and the moment I saw that man, I saw a ray of hope--” she paused to take a deep breath “--for the girls.”

“I knew you were stubborn,” he said scornfully. “Never thought you could be this stupid. If you were successful in your plan, and had I been captured and taken to your king, what would have become of your vow? Did you even think of that?” When she remained silent, he went on. “I’ll tell
“I’d end up an oathbreaker even if I’m killed.” She pressed her lips, a defeated look shadowing her face. “If you return to King’s Landing by yourself, I see no chance of survival for the girls. At least, if you’re recaptured, Lady Stark could try to persuade King Robb to negotiate with your father for their release.” She dropped her gaze. *Is that sadness in her eyes… or regret?* “It’s not my vow that matters, but the girls’ safety,” she said softly.

His blood still boiling at her betrayal, Jaime had made up his mind. “This is where I take leave of you, my lady. Enjoy your solitude.” Getting to his feet, he hauled the saddlebag on his shoulder and made his way to the horse that once belonged to the dead man. “I hope we never cross paths again, even if you manage to survive.” He gave her a long hard look, expecting her to beg for mercy, to plead with him to take her along. But she didn’t budge an inch, nor did she speak another word. All she did was fix those intense eyes on him, the look in them bearing no request for pardon, but a silent defiance and a quiet resignation to her fate.

Tearing his eyes off her, he mounted the horse that was loitering around restlessly and rode away along the path to his destiny, forcing his mind off the wench. He wasn’t gone for long when he noticed the faint pinkish glow that flooded the sky. Twilight. And soon, it would be dark, and the wench lay exposed to all the forces that roamed the woods, human and animal. With that leg, she wouldn’t survive for long, either ending up as dinner for some wild creature or an easy target for mummers or bandits or rapists…

*Rapists… No woman deserves a fate as horrible as that,* he thought, stopping in his tracks, the last look in her eyes haunting him. *Not even one as ugly as her.*

*But she betrayed me, she deserves to die…*

*I’m the reason she’s invalid, because of me she might end up a cripple even if she does manage to survive…*

In a quandary, Jaime rode back and forth around the same spot, wondering what to do next.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Can Jaime overcome his resentment and go back for her? Can the two of them temporarily settle their differences and tolerate each other?

_She’s no more my responsibility_, Jaime convinced himself, steering his mount onward. _There’s no looking back._

He had injured her, and the wench had taken her revenge by betraying him. He owed her nothing anymore. While it took him a great deal of such self-reassurance to aid him with his escape, his progress was sadly short lived after every such attempt. And happen it did, once again, at the next clump of bushes he encountered. His eyes fell upon the ghastly sight of a woman’s battered, naked body taken apart by crows and creatures of the earth that fed on cadavers. Her small clothes lay by her side, soiled in the mud, tattered and ruined, an obvious sign of womanly struggle. Raped, and left to die when the bastards had no more use for her flesh, he surmised, his gut churning at the thought of such torture being inflicted on one so frail and innocent as her.

He carried on, shaking the vision off his head, but he was not gone long, when his thoughts flew to the wench again. Disturbing images crowded his mind, her face replacing that of the pitiful corpse that lay in the bushes. He had heard stories of the Kingsroad and the nearby woods being unsafe for women. Even if someone did find her alive, if she got into the wrong hands, there would be no saying what could happen. Rape, in his opinion, was a crime as heinous as murder, if not worse. He shuddered as Queen Rhaella’s screams rang in his ears, still fresh in his mind, serving as a constant reminder of his helplessness. _That’s how the big homely wench would perhaps end up too... if I don’t go back for her. Her honour violated, and her body left to rot... a feast for the crows._

_She cheated me_, countered the Lannister brain inside him. _Why should I bother about her?_ The wench could deal with rapists, he told himself, and murderers. Even without a sword, she was competent enough to knock a man like him to the dust. After all, she had claimed credit to such an accomplishment, herself. _And she almost did succeed with me_, he groaned, recollecting their duel. With hands as large as the Mountain’s, and a heart full of spite and bitterness, she was capable of biting the head off any man that came near her.

He had moved ahead no more than a few feet, when a small voice inside him made its presence felt. _She can be of help to me._ Alone, he was more prone to danger, but with her, two blades were better than one.

_She’s nearly crippled. What good is a broken woman to me? She’ll only slow me down, reduce my chances of success._

Placated by this reasoning, he rode on for another short stretch when a distant blood curdling howl brought him to a grinding halt. Was that a wolf? Or something even viler? He cleared his head, trying to wipe out the vision of the blue eyes that had mocked him as he walked away from her, eyes that had taunted him for leaving her to die while he turned his back to her.

_I swore a vow, to protect the weak and the innocent._
She is weak and wounded, and innocent, she seems to be, but after what she did to me... does innocence even matter?

Ignoring the nagging discomfort that was slowly eating into a remote corner of his mind, Jaime pushed himself to carry on. But the conflict inside him refused to leave him in peace, his mind’s eye once again throwing up the broad, freckled face, and particularly those eyes that looked so out of place on her, conveying volumes where words failed.

*The man I killed could have had companions lurking around the corner.*

His blood grew cold at the possibility of Brienne being found alive by the boy-king’s men. While she would survive, they would soon be in pursuit of him with help from her. Knowing every step of his plan, she would waste no time in revealing his next destination. Had he made a big mistake leaving her behind? By calling the attention of the Stark boy’s men and getting herself taken alive, she could easily lead them to his capture.

*Yet another reason to go back for her...*

Jaime wheeled his horse around and headed back the way he came, galloping away as fast as the beast could carry him, his heart now at his throat. His tense eyes kept darting towards the rapidly darkening sky from time to time, while his turbulent mind tried not to work out the gruesome possibilities, were he to turn up too late. His apprehension quickly mounting, he came upon her lying in the same spot where he had left her.

She bore no visible signs of life. *Oh, gods, Brienne, please don’t be dead.*

The sense of desperate urgency gnawing at him from within, he leapt off the horse, half-walking and half-running towards her. He kneeled by her side and grabbed her wrist, searching for a pulse, hoping to find one, hoping he wasn’t too late. Heaving a sigh of relief when he felt the rhythmic thumping of her heart, he got up to fetch water, for getting her conscious enough to travel would be far better than him having to go through the ordeal of physically supporting her through the ride.

“I’m fine, Kingslayer,” came a weak moan from behind him as he dipped his hand inside the bag. The wench was conscious, but only just, glancing up at him with eyelids half shut. Feeble, though her voice was, the hatred for him in her cold tone was unmistakable. “I don’t need your help. I can--” she gasped, as she strained herself to speak “--walk. One thing puzzles me, though.” She could barely keep her tired eyes open, but that didn’t deter her from giving him a piercing look which undoubtedly said that she didn’t trust him. “Why are you back?”

“I didn’t want you falling victim to accomplices of the man I killed,” he said brusquely, approaching her as he spoke.

Her eyes burned with a strange glow. “You came back for your own selfish reasons.”

“Of course,” he replied, making it sound like the most obvious reason for his deed. “You’re my prisoner, I can’t afford to let you be captured by my enemy. You could lead them to me easily.” He didn’t want to offer any more explanations for the favor he had granted her. “We must leave,” he murmured, dropping down to a knee and offering his hand to help her up. “We’ve been through enough for the day. I don’t want to--”

She pushed his hand away roughly, glowering at him. “You left me to die in the midst of nowhere,” she shouted with renewed vigour, possibly drawing her strength out of pure hatred for him. “And now you come back, expecting me to follow you wordlessly?”
Jaime rose to his full height, towering over her. “You betrayed me, wench!” He stared down at her, echoing her emotions, his tone and glare matching hers, as he instantly regretted his decision to return for her. “What did you expect me to do? Treat you like a pretty little princess? Carry you to safety in my arms?” The others take her, he muttered under his breath.

“You drove me to such an extreme, Kingslayer!” She coughed in the attempt to raise her voice, her strength beginning to fail her again. “You wounded me, took me prisoner and dragged me around, chained like an animal--” she continued glaring at him, her eyes full of loathing. “You’re still insecure. No wonder you enjoy keeping me under your thumb.”

“I’ve done nothing different from what you, your king or your beloved Lady Stark did to me,” he roared. “I merely punished you for your betrayal.” He shook his head in frustration, watching her breathe heavily, weakening by the minute. “We can save our arguments for later, wench,” he said, forcing himself to calm down. “Time to get out of this place, unless you want to spend the rest of your life as a cripple.”

When she had nothing to say to his reprimand, he bent down and began unlocking her chains. She turned away with a childish indifference, annoying him further. “Would you do me the honour of accompanying me, my lady?” he asked, holding out his hand to her in a gesture akin to asking her for a dance, his resentment towards her back with a vengeance. “Or would you rather spend your time here in the company of the monsters that prowl the night?” He waited, anticipating an equally cutting reply, but none came. Instead, she took his hand and quietly got up, leaning against him for support as her knees buckled under the pressure of her weight. Leading her to the horse, he helped her mount the beast. Securing the bag in its position, he climbed behind her, wrapping his hand around her and pressing her close to him so that she wouldn’t slip.

She lurched forward, shoving his hand away as if stung by his touch. “There’s no need for that,” she protested. “I can manage--”

Gods, this wretched woman! “You falling to death is the last thing I want today.” He made his stand clear, not having even the slightest inclination to tolerate any further nonsense from her.

“I could sit behind you,” she suggested.

“No,” he shot down her idea immediately, uncomfortable with leaving his back exposed to her.

She turned to him, her pale face breaking into a scornful smile that made her horsey teeth look more misshapen than usual. “Are you worried that I might attack you?” she asked, hitting his self-esteem and pride where it hurt the most. “You fear me, don’t you? You’re scared of a bloody woman.” Her eyes had a gleam of petty victory. “Don’t worry, unlike you, I don’t stab my enemies in the back, Kingslayer--”

Jaime clenched his fists as she spoke, a single thought consuming him, the voice as vivid as if it were yesterday. Burn them all... “Shut your mouth,” he yelled, causing a shocked swarm of insects to buzz out of the nearby tree. “You wouldn’t want to hurt me, wench,” he mellowed down after a conscious effort, suppressing the unpleasant memories that flooded him. “You’re stupid, but not that much.”

“Then why won’t you let me be on my own?”

“Fine,” he decided to let go, giving up arguing any further. Reasoning with this thick skinned cow was pointless, he would only be hitting his head against a wall. He dismounted the horse. “Stay still,” he ordered her, pulling out the rope from the bag when she had shifted backwards.
“Wait—” she stared at the rope in his hand. “Are you going to tie me up?”

“Of course, I am.” He flashed her a triumphant smile as he bound her to the animal. “I’m not stupid either.” When he had finished tying her hands as well, he got on in front of her. Taking control of the reigns, he rode away, hoping for their journey to be uneventful. To his relief, she came quietly and they continued in peace, each resigned to their fate, silently accepting that they would have to put up with the other to achieve their means.

With neither of them saying a word, the only sound around them was the humming of insects and an occasional distant howl or a roar. “Are you still alive?” He couldn’t help asking after a long bout of silence, worried that she might have passed out again.

“Hmm,” was all he got in response.

“We’ve reached.” He slowed down, spying the inn at a distance. Bringing the mount to a halt, he got down.

“Why have we stopped this far away?” she asked, as he untied her.

He helped her down and walked her and the horse to the inn. “We can’t let them know you’re my prisoner,” he said, thinking quickly, a plan taking shape in his head.

The innkeep was immersed in his books when they entered. Jaime helped the wench to one of the chairs a little distance away and made his way to him. “I’d like a bed for the night,” he announced his presence, disguising his accent.

“Certainly, Lord—” The man faltered when he looked up, his expression souring as he took in Jaime’s ragged, filthy appearance.

“Jory Mormont,” Jaime lied, bringing up the first name he could make up, hoping the man wouldn’t recognize him.

“Mormont…” The man leaned toward him for a closer look. “Wasn’t your family killed in the war—”

“Not me, I wasn’t there,” Jaime spoke fast, cursing himself for his stupidity. “I’m a distant nephew of Jeor Mormont. I’m taking my wife to her parents.” He had to steer the conversation off the dangerous subject at once. “Pardon my shabby appearance. My wife and I—” he turned to the wench “—we ran into a little skirmish on the way, attacked by the bloody mummers—”

“Is that a woman?” the man interjected, following Jaime’s gaze.

“Hold your tongue!” Jaime berated him. “That’s my lady wife you’re talking about.”

“Beg your pardon me, m’lord,” he immediately apologized, looking abashed.

Mollified, Jaime went on with his demands, this time more confident than before. “I also require the services of a maester.” He gestured towards Brienne. “My wife’s injured.”

The innkeep smiled amiably. “We do have a maester on the first floor. I’ll send word to him.”

Jaime dug out some silver from the pouch he had seized from the wench and tossed it at the man. Once the payment was counted and found to the owner’s satisfaction, he was handed a key. “We also need some food and ale,” he commanded. “My lady can’t walk, so why don’t you send us some upstairs?”
Once their horse was settled at the stables and they were safely locked in their room and out of everyone’s earshot, his wife unleashed her fury on him, looking as though she would like nothing better than to slit his throat with a dagger. “Why did you lie to him?”

“Do you think we’d be walking around freely had I told him that you were the honourable Brienne of Tarth and me the infamous Kingslayer?” Is she really this naive, or is she just trying to get under my skin?

“As if they wouldn’t come to know if you lied.” She flushed, her anger rising. “And Lord Mormont, indeed! How dare you fake the name of a house you massacred?”

“They were killed in war, wench,” Jaime explained patiently. “It was an honourable death. Wars tend to end like that for some people.”

She still wouldn’t let him be. “You’re no honourable warrior. You broke your most sacred vow--” she spoke quietly through clenched teeth “--and soiled the white cloak that you swore to uphold--”

“Don’t presume to know more about Aerys Targaryen than the stories you’ve heard,” he cut her, his voice menacingly low.

She spoke no more about Aerys, but eyed Jaime as if he were vermin, worthy only of being crushed under her feet. “You’re the most abominable, horrible--” Mercifully, he was saved by a knock on the door before she could shower him with any more praises.

“Seven blessings to you, my lord,” a portly middle aged man with a greying beard greeted him. “I’m here to take a look at your lady wife.”

“Come in, maester,” Jaime stepped aside to let him in, leading him to Brienne who was now seated on the bed. The maester sat down by her side to examine her leg. When he asked her to pull down her breeches, Jaime looked away, all of a sudden uncomfortable.

“It is infected,” he heard the man say, drawing his attention back to her. As the maester cleaned the wound by wiping the pus and blood off it, Jaime watched him, trying not to be distracted by the wench’s never ending legs. “But it’s nothing serious, my lord. She should be healed in a day or two.” Applying a tincture to the affected part, he bandaged it once he was done. “Take this milk of the poppy tonight, my lady.” He thrust a vial in her palm. “Seven blessings,” he said again, giving her a bow.

Finally peaceful when he realized that she would suffer no lasting damage, Jaime thanked him and saw him off after paying him some silver.

Once they were alone, Brienne tensed. “There’s only one bed.” She wrapped a sheet around her, hurriedly covering herself when she caught him looking at her. “And I don’t want you--”

“You can have the whole of it.” He wanted to allay her womanly fears, annoyed with her unshaken prejudice towards him. “I don’t intend sleeping tonight, nor am I interested in getting anywhere close to you.”

She raised her brows. “Are you going to keep a watch on me?”

“On us ,” he corrected her, seating himself at the other end of the bed. “We’re at a constant risk of being discovered, so one of us needs to stay awake at all times.”

And that’s what he did, sitting by her side, staring at the ceiling and the dark walls around him, keeping a watch over her. What he refused to admit to her was that his action was the result of his
nagging distrust in her, not the fear of external forces attacking them. He kept his spirits high by diverting himself with thoughts of Cersei, looking forward to her warm body wrapped around him as soon as he got home. Eventually, fatigue did take over and he dozed off, only to wake up not more than an hour, or maybe two later, the familiar restlessness and insecurity creeping into him once again.

When morning came after an excruciatingly long and sleep-deprived night, Jaime left the room quietly, taking care not to disturb the wench. He rode into the village whose borders the inn touched upon. Fortunately, this one was unburnt with most of its greenery and civilization still intact. Finding his way to the marketplace, he decided that fresh clothes were something they desperately needed, for they couldn’t keep up the ruse of a highborn married couple clad in the filthiest of rags, stinking like a pair of rodents. He bought a pair of breeches and a tunic for himself, now at a loss for what to dress the wench in.

He stopped when he spotted a place that sold clothes for women. *I can’t imagine what she’d look like wearing one of those,* he suppressed a smile when he pictured her in a gown. Thinking it better to find her women’s garb, for wearing a man’s clothes like she usually did would make her stand out easily, he emerged from the shop, holding in his arms a gown for her. *Blue might make her look slightly better,* he had decided, picking the one he thought would suit her best.

When Jaime returned, the wench was just waking up, stretching herself. “How’s your leg?” he inquired, hoping she was fit enough to resume travel. Lingering at one place for too long was never a good strategy.

She winced when she tried to fold her leg, giving up as the pain got the better of her. “Not fit for a duel,” she said dully. “But I’m good to travel again.”

He observed her closely. She certainly didn’t look ‘good to travel’. “We’ll stay another day,” he declared, tossing her the bundle he had bought for her. “Bathe and change,” he ordered, fishing out a small knife from the bag. “That way, we would attract lesser attention.”

“I can’t wear this!” She scowled as she unpacked the dress. “I need some regular clothes. I have some with me, why can’t I don them instead of this abomination?”

He rolled his eyes. Dealing with her mulish nature was going to be more tedious than putting up with a real wife. “You can’t ride the country dressed like a man,” he tried to reason with her. “Not when we’re supposed to be in hiding. Besides--” he flashed her an unpleasant look “--No matter what you wear, you’re going to look ill at ease and disproportionate,” he remarked, wanting to be as unkind as possible. “Blue might make you look atleast somewhat tolerable,” he voiced the reason behind his choice. “Have some mercy upon my eyes, *wife,* for I have to look at you night and day for weeks to come!”

Shooting him a glare, she got off the bed and limped to the bath, slamming the door on his face.

*She can walk on her own, that’s an improvement.* Jaime heaved a sigh of relief. He didn’t have to touch her anymore. He would be spared of her revulsion, atleast to some extent.

A few minutes later when she came out, all Jaime could do was stare, and stare he did, not to flatter or compliment her, but to search his mind for the best possible insults he could think of. The gown did nothing to improve her appearance, except, possibly, bring out her eyes. He pursed his lips, biting down a smile. “You look--”

“--hideous,” she finished angrily. “I know.”
“Like a tree forced into a maid’s attire,” he blurted out, laughing uncontrollably.

Reddenning at his remark, she stood there, nervously picking on her nails. So the woman can blush, he observed, astonished to see the usually bland face show some signs of emotion other than anger and resentment. The gown seemed to enhance her curves, curves he never knew existed… until now, for he had always looked upon her as a long slab of wood, broad and flat all over. He was hit by another jolt of surprise when his eyes lingered on her exposed neckline. So, she did have--

“Don’t you want to bathe?” She interrupted his thoughts, looking uneasy with his blatant staring.

Without answering her, he gathered his clothes and the knife and disappeared inside. He cut his overgrown hair slightly shorter, and crudely trimmed his beard without shaving it off completely. He didn’t want to look like a savage, but he didn’t want to be recognized as Jaime Lannister either. He froze when he looked into the face staring at him from the glass. Pale and gaunt with dark patches around his eyes, hair filthy and lice ridden, he looked ten years older. What will father say when he sees me like this?

After he had bathed, Jaime stepped out of the tub when he was convinced he didn’t stink to an unbearable extent. At least, that’ll make me a little less repulsive to the wench, he thought, as he got dressed, relishing the feel of clean clothes on his body. He had left his hair as it was, darkened and dirt-ridden, for if he scrubbed it clean, the famous Lannister golden mane would call out his lie and he would no longer look his disguise.

He caught the wench throwing him an appraising look when he emerged out of the bath, fully dressed. “I told you, I’m handsome,” he couldn’t resist teasing, waiting for her to snap at him in response.

“Being handsome doesn’t absolve you of your sins, Kingslayer,” she said icily, the aversion for him back on her face after what he thought was a fleeting glance of admiration.

“You hold no right to judge my sins, wench, so we’d best let it be,” he hit back, sixteen year old memories threatening to torment him again. “If you care for some lunch, we ought to leave now. I’d definitely appreciate some food in my belly.” He headed outside, his stomach rumbling in hunger. She hobbled after him grumpily, refusing to accept his hand when he offered to help. “Go on,” he muttered under his breath. “Limp away to your death.”

They sat down at a table in the corner, eating in silence. As soon as they had finished, a stout man dressed in the garb of a farmer approached them. “I’ve seen ya around, good ser, back in the woods.” He peered good naturedly at Jaime. “Heading toward the Kingsroad, are ya?” he inquired, keen eyes studying them curiously.

Jaime shuddered, masking the horror that was threatening to show on his face with a friendly smile. He knows who I am. He had do do some quick thinking.

He gave the stranger a sheepish look. “Pardon me, my wife and I need to get back to some…er--” he lowered his gaze, pretending to blush “--unfinished business.” He got up, winking at the man mischievously. “If you know what I mean.” He bit his lip, turning to the wench. “Come along, my love, let’s go--”

“Wait…what--” she began, ready to object, when he gave her a warning look that shut her up.

“Come on,” he breathed in her ear, tugging at her arm. He rushed ahead, and she followed. “Faster,” he urged, his patience wearing out, the panic in his chest rising with every passing second.
“I can’t.” Her face was twisted in pain as she tried to walk as fast as she could. Stumbling awkwardly behind him, she was no match for his pace, and Jaime’s frustration only mounted as he watched her struggle. Having no other choice, and dreading the moment when he would have to face her wrath for what he was about to do, he lifted her off the ground.

“What the hell--” She began, when he carried her toward the stairs.

“Quiet!” he hissed, leaning closer, pretending to kiss her. “Just control your temper for a while,” he whispered before she could say another word. “There’s no time to explain or argue. We have to get out of here at once. And pray, look happy, wench, act like you’re my wife—” he stopped, when his request was rewarded with an angry look. “Never mind.” He sighed, deciding not to expect the impossible from her. “You don’t have to fake anything, just don’t show them your face, and try not to gouge my eyes out in a fit of fury,” he added, intimidated by her hand which was too close to his face for comfort. As he ascended the steps, he closed his ears to a string of whistles and loud laughter behind him, likely from men in varying stages of intoxication who presumably thought… well, he tried not to think about what they were possibly thinking. The wench would skin him alive if he voiced his suspicion.

“Can’t wait for a good fuck, can ya,” shouted a voice, confirming his doubt. More raucous laughter and jeering followed. “That’s one fine woman ya have there, I'll wager, the pleasure o’ lickin’ her cunt—”

“Ignore them,” Jaime muttered, feeling the wench stiffen in his arms. Burning with embarrassment for perhaps the first time since his capture, he dashed up the stairs, stopping only when they entered the room. Putting her down on the bed, he began packing their things urgently.

“We’re leaving now,” he announced, carefully avoiding her face. “That man knows who I am.”

The wench frowned in response. “Why the hell did you carry me away like I was your conquest, or some cheap—” she hesitated before uttering the word “—whore?”

“I hated that as much as you did, trust me on that,” he said bitterly. “I’m fortunate to have my back intact after bearing your weight. Even Sandor Clegane would probably weigh lesser than you.” She’s not as heavy as I expected, came a fleeting thought in his head, although he would never admit it to her.

Ignoring his jape, she went on, blinded by rage at what he had done. “Did you hear what that man said—”

“They think you’re my wife,” he tried to pacify her. “And, how does one man’s opinion matter to you? You’re never even going to see him again.” He stood there, breathing heavily from the strain of lifting her. “Now, get off that bed so that we can get the hell out of here, unless—” he couldn’t miss this opportunity to get her worked up “—you want me to carry you downstairs, my love.”

That shut her up for the time being. Grinning wickedly at her discomfort, he held the door open as she staggered towards him, gritting her teeth and glaring at him, her face red with anger.
“I’m no child, nor am I a weakling,” Brienne snarled, pushing him away forcibly when Jaime grasped her arm to help her down the stairs. “I can walk unassisted.” Her voice spewed venom, her revulsion for her detestable captor growing every single minute. “I’m no cripple either, at least not just yet,” she bit her tongue, spitting out the word, offended that he was treating her like one. Making sure that she remained one step behind him, she decided to keep away from him as far as possible. Although grudgingly grateful that he did change his mind and come to her aid, she couldn’t shake the feeling that it was he, in the first place, who had been responsible for her pitiful condition.

“A child? Not at all!” he exclaimed, his eyes widening in mock innocence while he flashed her the usual cutting smile that he seemed to have solely reserved for her. “You’re my wife, wench. But I suppose—” his smile gave way to a sad look in his eyes “—it is my misfortune that I have to keep reminding you about it.” He clutched his chest dramatically. “You do break my poor heart at times, my dear!”

She rolled her eyes in anger and turned her head sideways, ready to look at anything but him. It was only for the sake of Sansa and Arya that she restrained herself from pouncing on him. Nothing would’ve given her more satisfaction than the freedom to knock him down. *Wife, indeed! How dare he persist with this stupid ruse even when unnecessary!* “I’d rather be named your murderer and forgo my head for it, Kingslayer,” she hissed. “Better than being known as your wife, real or otherwise.” For a brief moment, she wondered what being married to this monster would be like. *Thank the Gods, he’s in the Kingsguard,* she thought, relieved that no lady would have to suffer such a hateful fate. None, but his sister, who, if Stannis was to be believed, was no grieving widow. Having betrayed the king to bear the spawn of the man she called brother, her reputation was no less tainted than his. What a wonderful pair they’d make!

Jaime spun around, casting her a dirty look. “I’m not too happy about dragging you around, either,” he barked. “You’re the wife none would desire. Most men dream about marrying a woman, not a walking, talking, expressionless plank of wood that I’m stuck with.”

Brienne knew better than to do him the honour of a reply. Answering him would only mean falling for his bait, and that usually didn’t end well for her.

The sharp look on his face eased into a contented grin at her mounting displeasure. “I’m not as bad as you perceive me to be, wench,” he continued, his justification provoking her further. “Women often tend to find my charms irresistible, but—” he paused to watch her, enjoying her discomfort “—that happens to be specific to women. Since you’re not one, I see no concern, nor inhibition in engaging in this little lie with you, my dear wife,” he finished, his sour tone leaving her bitter and frowning.

Already annoyed by the tale he had concocted at the inn, her rage only doubled at the incessant taunts he so freely bestowed upon her. That she was miffed by the fact that the anger was beginning to leave her increasingly distracted didn’t help, and she missed a step, stumbling. Jaime was quick to grab her arm before she could tumble down the winding stairway. “Careful, woman,” he warned, his
green eyes dancing with mischief and his expression far from concern or worry. “I have no wish to be widowed so early in life.”

Brienne was in no frame of mind to relent to his nonsense. “Would you grant me the kind favour of keeping your hands off me, my lord?” Wrenching free of his grasp, she took another step backward, putting as much distance between them as she could. “Because if you don’t, I might have to do something about it, and--” she glared at him, wishing she could slay him with her bare hands “--unlike you, I don’t mind being widowed if it meant saving the world from a villain like you.”

He laughed out aloud at her threat. “You bear no sword, wench,” he scoffed, stating the obvious. “Nor do you possess the physical strength anymore to overpower me. Even if you did, you would never cross the line, never betray Lady Stark, who, for some damn reason means the world to you. So how, may I ask, do you plan to carry out the promise you just made me?” He sneered at her silence. “Go on, tell me, my lady,” he goaded her. “You seem to take a special interest in fulfilling vows, don’t you? Or--” he lowered his voice “--is it just empty words that you have?”

“I strive to keep up the promises I make,” she said earnestly, straightening her back and standing up to her full height. Aiming to hit him where it would hurt the most, she went on. “Unlike some anointed knights who are a blot on their kind, unworthy of their title --”

“You aren’t obliged to call me ser if my title troubles you, my lady.” Unfazed by her verbal onslaught and her expression of distaste at his suggestion, he smiled, once again the same awful smirk that made her feel like dirt under his boots, or a filthy worm that ought to be crushed to death. “I could be just Jaime to you, or how about--” he took a step in her direction and tilted his head towards her, his lips menacingly close to hers, so close that she could catch a whiff of his masculine scent “-- lord husband ?”

That one instant when he had carried her being painful enough, she didn’t know how to handle his nearness this time again. Slightly breathless at his proximity and her face burning in trepidation at the prospect of any physical contact, she drew away at once, fearing that he might kiss her just out of spite. Forcing herself to breathe normally, she turned away, avoiding his piercing eyes which seemed to be powerful enough to read her mind. Once the familiar contempt for her was back in his eyes, she was relieved, for his negativity was something she could deal with, her usual bitterness for him slowly returning. “Maybe once you’re dead, Kingslayer?” she suggested, her tone icy and her heartbeat back to its regular pace.

They stood rooted to the spot, glowering at each other, both of them wanting nothing more than to beat the shit out of the other, neither of them ready to relent, when a third voice called out politely. “How can I help you, m’lord… m’lady?” It was then that she realized that they had reached the entrance. The innkeep looked at them patiently, awaiting a response. Spared of listening to any more of Jaime’s shit, she heaved a sigh of relief as he tore his eyes away from her and strode towards the man. While he settled the payment, Brienne deliberately faced away from the crowd of drunks who had jeered at them minutes ago, anxious that they might start again. Sensing their bawdy remarks and rude whispers behind her back, she was beginning to get uncomfortable when Jaime tugged at her arm, indicating that they should leave.

“There’s no need to touch me for every little thing,” she snapped, jerking his hand away for the third time that day. “We can talk. You aren’t mute, nor am I deaf!”

“And you don’t have to be a stubborn mule everytime,” he hit back, making a face. “You’re supposed to be my wife, for fuck’s sake. If I don’t touch you even a bit, we’re bound to attract atten-”

“I don’t care. Just stay the hell away from me.” She glared at him. “Is that understood?”
His lips parted in a menacing smile. “I do admire your audacity, my dear,” he drawled, as they walked towards the stables. “But do give me an opportunity to point out that you’re not the one in control here. It’s just a matter of minutes before you’re in shackles again, and this time, I’m going to make sure I get some extra ropes on you.”

“You’re going to tie me up again?” she blurted out, disappointed with his declaration, though unsurprised. “After I’ve given you my word that I won’t betray you again?” She knew he wouldn’t budge, but she would lose nothing trying.

“As you’ve been kind enough to repeatedly point out how much you loathe me—” he stopped to talk to her “—what other choice have you left me with, other than to adorn you with those chains which, I must say, suit you so well? They’d have gone well with your armour, which, sadly, you had to part with.” He threw her a sly wink and a mischievous grin which left her unsettled.

Fighting the fleeting urge to get more than a glimpse of him, she had to admit that once he had tidied himself up, he no longer looked nor smelled as repellent as he did earlier. She could now see why the Lannisters were famed for their beauty and charm. She wondered if Cersei was equally beautiful. She had to be, for if not, why would the handsome Kingslayer, who could’ve had any woman he desired, bring dishonour to his family by resorting to incest? As she stole a furtive glance at him, she realized why the maids in Tarth she grew up with were so smitten by his beauty; so much that they sang praises of his charm and dreamed of wedding him one day. But she bore no such feelings towards him, for in her eyes, he was nothing but evil, worthy only of hatred. His beauty and charm didn’t make him any less repulsive in her opinion. A man was known by his actions, and this man--

“Wench!”

Hearing his voice, she came out of her trance. Lost in her thoughts all along, she noticed only now that she had barely made progress, while Jaime was far ahead. She found him staring impatiently. “Have you fallen asleep? No sound from you for a while, I thought you might be dead--”

“Keep going, I’m right behind you,” she cut in, limping after him. The man had a sharp tongue, and right now, she could do a lot better than be subjected to its wrath. “We have the gold,” she changed the subject, as they trudged along the dirty pathway leading to the horses. “Why cannot we buy another horse?”

Jaime shook his head. “Gold doesn’t grow on trees, wench,” he said sagely, before breaking into a smug smile. “Well, it does for us, Lannisters, but unfortunately for you, Lady Stark seems to have had access to limited resources.” He stopped to count their meagre wealth in the pouch that was now in his custody. “We need to conserve the gold we have. It’s a long way to King’s Landing, who knows what we might need it for.”

Seeing no point in arguing, she followed him at her own pace, vehemently refusing his help yet again when he offered. *Better to end up a cripple than cling to his arm.*

“Get on,” he ordered when he had untied their horse. Once she had mounted the steed and taken her place towards the rear half of the animal, he gestured to her to move to the front. “You’ll sit in front this time,” he announced.

“I’m not--” she began, ready to resist.

“Move,” he commanded again, forcing her to do his bidding, obviously in no mood to relent. “I want you where I can see your hands,” he insisted.
She didn’t budge an inch, continuing to sit where she was. “You think I’m going to betray you again.” She noticed the mistrust in his eyes. “You’re worried.”

“Trust goes both ways, wench,” he said brusquely. “If you don’t take my word, why should I?”

She opened her mouth to protest. “What--”

“Why should I?” he repeated, his eyes gleaming with a look she couldn’t quite fathom. Was it hatred? Or malice? Or something far worse than either of these? A shiver ran down her spine at the idea of him abandoning her to murderers and rapers yet again. No good would come out of defying him, she decided wearily. “Give me one reason I should trust you,” he asked, daring her to disobey him.

“Very well.” Cursing him under her breath, she conceded to his demands, shifting to the position he wanted her to. She watched wordlessly, struggling to bite back the helplessness and frustration simmering inside her as he went about the elaborate process of fastening the manacles back on her wrists, slowly and methodically. She flashed him a glare of impatience as he took his own time to lock her up “I thought we were in a hurry, and here you are, taking all the time in the world to accomplish a task as trivial as this.”

Ignoring her, he carried on working, finishing with binding her to the animal with the rope. “That looks good.” He stood back, admiring his work with a satisfied smile. “This way, you’re going nowhere I don’t want you to.”

To be doubly sure, he tugged at the bonds one more time to ensure they were in place and got in behind her. Throwing his arms around her, he seized the reins, taking control of the mount. The horse jerked before it took off, the sudden movement leading to his arm brushing against her breast. Her stomach lurched at the touch, an uneasy chill spreading through her. How she wished she had her armour back on! Without it, she felt vulnerable, exposed, unclothed. “Watch how you handle that beast,” she spat, more concerned about where he touched her rather than the bumpy ride ahead. “If you find it that difficult to control an animal as tame as this, why don’t you take my place and give me the reins? Let me--”

“Oh, I’m a fine rider, wench,” he waved her away. “I’ve had years of practice, and experience far more than women who like to assume that they can beat the shit out of knights like me. I assure you, it won’t be that bad. Bear with me for a few days, like I said, I’m not as bad as you think I am.”

_Not days, but weeks, she thought ruefully, or maybe many moons, who knows._

They re-commenced their journey, with Brienne becoming alarmingly conscious of his presence behind her with every passing moment. Try as she might, she couldn’t ignore his warm breath over her neck everytime he exhaled, his thighs touching hers, though inadvertently, everytime the horse galloped with a force higher than normal, his firm chest pushing against her back, sending shockwaves through her body. _Gods, when is this ordeal going to come to an end?_ She groaned inaudibly, her mind thrown back to the young maids of her childhood. She amused herself for a while by imagining their reaction to something like this. They would’ve killed for such an intimate ride with the Kingslayer. Those were innocent girls, young and naive and ignorant, but for her, the Kingslayer was just a means to retrieve her hostages, a necessary evil to be put up with for a promise to be kept.

The first leg of their journey went without incident with both of them choosing to seek company in their thoughts rather than each other. As neither of them spoke, there was no room for conflict.

A little while later, they decided to halt to attend to their basic needs. Brienne made her way into the
woods to make water, but he stopped her, insisting on accompanying her. All she could do was stare at him in horror. “I won’t look, I swear,” he promised, when she opened her mouth to object, appalled at his suggestion. “I just want to make sure--”

“If you think I’m going to run off into the wild with this leg, you’re a fool,” she said coldly, her heart overflowing with dislike for him. “Allow a woman some privacy, will you? You’re a knight, doesn’t your title--”

“Ah.” He smirked, his tone back to its condescending worst. “So you do acknowledge that I’m a knight. How… touching!”

“I was merely reminding you of the vows befitting your title, ser,” she stressed on ‘ser’, deliberately putting up a mocking voice. “Defend the innocent, protect the weak, respect women--”

“I do remember all that!” He looked annoyed. “Go on, have it your way. I’ll stay right here.” He stood there as she vanished into the trees in search of a suitable spot to relieve herself. A few minutes later, when she was back, she found him taking a piss by the bushes where she had left him. She stared at him for a few seconds, but then averted her eyes, red-faced and ashamed at her unabashedness when she realized what she had been doing.

“Have you ever been to Winterfell?” he asked abruptly, without context. He sounded mildly irritated when she still didn’t look at him. “Oh come on, wench, can’t you ever be normal?”

“There’s no time for small talk. We should leave if you’ve finished,” she insisted, ignoring his question.

Least bothered by her objection, he attempted to make conversation again. “How did you come into Lady Stark’s service? That’s something we can talk about.”

She kept her eyes away, seeing no point in pursuing a civil conversation with him. Everything about her started and ended with sarcasm for him, and she was least inclined to fall prey to more of his taunts. “Not your concern, Kingslayer,” she dismissed him bitterly.

“It had to be recently,” he pressed on, despite her curt response. “You weren’t with her at Winterfell.”

She turned to him, surprised. “How do you know?”

“Because--” he drew in a breath, straightening himself to adjust his breeches, making quite a show of it “--I visited Winterfell. I would’ve noticed your dour head smacking into the archways.”

Embarrassed by the blatant and arrogant display of male pride and authority in front of her, Brienne found herself growing increasingly uncomfortable. “Can we move on if you’re done?” she asked, hobbling back to the horse, wanting to get away from there.

They travelled on a few more miles until twilight set in. “Time to make camp for the night,” Jaime announced. They galloped around for a while looking for a suitable spot to settle down. “This seems to be just fine,” he observed, satisfied with the clearing they rode into. Dismounting, he tethered the horse to a tree and helped her down. Together, they put up the tent.

“In you get,” he commanded. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“If you could unchain me for a while--” she held out her hands “--I need to change, get out of these grimy, travel-worn clothes.”
For a moment she thought he might refuse her, insist that she remain in the feminine garb she wore, but he seemed to consider her request for what looked like eternity, before finally granting her wish and unlocking her chains. “In case you feel like trying anything funny, I’m armed.” He clasped the hilt of the sword on his belt, a reminder to her about who was in control. “I don’t think twice about attacking my enemies, and you, my dear wench, are no friend of mine.”

She staggered into the tent while he stayed where he was. Though mildly curious about why he chose to wander the woods alone with her safely under the shelter of the tent, she decided not to ask him about it, wanting to retire for the night without being told a second time. Rummaging through the bag, she pulled out her tunics and breeches, desperately wanting to get out of the ridiculous dress. Out here in the wilderness, she was no longer the wife of the imaginary Lord Jory Mormont. She was no lady. Taking the gown off and stripping down to her smallclothes, she was about to don her breeches when she heard a movement at the entrance.

She stood rooted to the spot. Wary of any signs of impending danger, she clutched the gown to her chest and assumed an attacking position. Disarmed and injured, she was unsure of how she might counter any attack, but she had to try.

“Wench,” drawled a familiar voice from just outside the entrance.

Heaving a sigh of relief, she relaxed. Before she could clothe herself, Jaime stumbled into the tent, struggling to keep himself upright. He walked in aimlessly, and would’ve crashed to the ground if she had not caught hold of him.

“What did you get the drink from?” she whispered as he crumpled to the floor by her side.

Paying no attention to her question, he shifted closer, encroaching into her personal space. “You’re a virgin, I take it?” She froze at the question, wondering what his intention might be. Her experience in Renly’s guard had taught her that even the most decent men when drunk, behaved unpredictably at times. When she didn’t reply, he went on. “Childhood must’ve been awful for you. Were you a foot taller than all the other boys? They laughed at you, called you names. Some boys like a challenge. One or two must’ve tried to get inside big Brienne.”

“One or two tried,” she admitted, reddening at the memory, not sure where this conversation was going.

“Ah,” he leaned in, peering into her eyes, the strong stench of the alcohol almost suffocating her as he breathed into her face. “You fought them off. Maybe you wished one of them could overpower you, fling you down, tear off your clothes—” an odd expression came over his face “—but none of them were strong enough.” He stared at her for a long moment making her cringe in uneasiness. “I’m strong enough,” he mouthed, his voice a hoarse whisper, and his eyes fixed on hers in an intense gaze.

What the hell does he mean?

She gulped, fighting to keep her composure. “Not interested.” She tried to sound firm, a choking
sensation of dread filling her chest. What if in a drunken state he tried to force himself on her? He had put to rest such fears countless times in the past, but who was to trust a drunken man? Not just any ordinary man, but one of the most accomplished warriors she had ever met. Wounded and disarmed, she stood no chance against him if he harboured the desire to dishonour her tonight.

“Of course you are,” he droned on, drawing his face another couple of inches closer to hers. “You’d love to know what it feels like to be a woman--”

Before she could stop herself, her womanly instincts kicked in. Unthinking, she balled her fist, making contact with his face and punching him hard on the nose, the blow catching him unawares.

“Ow!” He fell back in pain, clutching his nose and trying to stem the thin trickle of blood that was beginning to stream down it. “That was uncalled for!” The strange look in his eyes that had haunted her until a minute ago immediately gave way to one of pure loathing. One glance at him, and Brienne was relieved, she felt comfortable. While the earlier hint of lust in his eyes had filled her with fear, the return of his hatred for her was somewhat... reassuring. This meant that he was back to normal, and she, now safe again in his company.

“I’ve been warning you not to get too close to me. Who asked you to enter while I was--” She blushed, covering her chest with her arms, suddenly conscious of her semi-nakedness. Only now did she realize that she was clad in nothing but her smallclothes, the gown and her tunic, lying in a corner, forgotten in this chaos.

Jaime dropped his gaze, his features softening. “My apologies,” he murmured, hastily moving away to the opposite corner. “I was just trying to irk you. I didn’t mean to… You can be rest assured that I’m not going to rape you or--”

“I believe you,” she said quickly, wanting to drive him away so that she could get dressed in peace. “Now, if you could please be kind enough to let me--”

“Of course,” he whispered. Pulling himself to his feet, he ambled towards the exit.

Once he was gone, she dressed hastily, fearing that he may be back soon in the event of the ale in his blood dominating his sanity and his ability to think clearly. Completely famished, she ate her share of the food without bothering to wait for him, and then huddled to her corner and lay down. In a silent prayer to the gods, she asked them to keep the girls safe, pleading with them to rid her of the Kingslayer’s company soon, hoping for better and fruitful days to come.

When she woke the next morning, it was broad daylight. Alone in the tent, she looked around for Jaime. Had he left her in the middle of nowhere once again? As if in answer to her thoughts, he entered.

“Get ready, wench.” He was back to his crisp and commanding tone once again, his voice nor his gait bearing any sign of the previous night’s intoxication. “We need to move soon. We’re too close to Harrenhal for comfort. The Boltons could have an eye out for us, and if that farmer confesses the truth, we’re in for massive trouble.” When he had finished conveying what he had intended to, he left without sparing her a second glance.

Once she had dressed and tidied herself up, she left the tent. Jaime was by the horse, busy fastening the bag to it, his back to the tree to which it was tethered. As she moved in his direction, something that she saw out of the corner of her eye made her stop dead in her tracks. She caught sight of a figure crouching behind the tree, blade in hand, ready to strike the Kingslayer the moment he moved into a position convenient for attack.
She did some quick thinking, trying not to panic. Lacking a sword, she couldn’t do much, but she had to act discreetly, for alerting Jaime would only scare away their assailant, or worse still, instigate him to strike early. The man could have accomplices hidden across the woods, in which case, they would be severely outnumbered if he chose to summon them. Jaime was blissfully oblivious of the attacker, and the attacker had not yet spotted Brienne, which meant the only way to stop him was for her to make the first move as soon as she could.

Jaime looked up when she approached him. “You’re here finally,” he remarked, acknowledging her presence, but still ignorant of his unknown stalker. “Up you get.” He patted the horse affectionately.

When she was close enough, she decided to play by her instinct.

Too stunned to react, Jaime froze as she lunged at him, grabbing the sword at his waist. She could make out his hand slide to the hilt of the other sword on his belt, but then he stopped, hearing the rustling behind the tree. The mysterious assailant jumped out of his hiding, leaving her with no option but to strike at once. Before Jaime could do anything, Brienne shoved him away with all her might and plunged the sword into the stranger’s chest, stabbing him through the heart. With a loud, guttural cry, the man crashed to the ground, writhing in a pool of blood. For a minute, she stood still, glaring at the man. Only when she was completely satisfied that he was dead did she relax, sinking to the ground, the exertion leaving her breathless and devoid of strength.

“You saved my life,” Jaime said quietly, staring at her victim, his eyes wide in disbelief. “Why?”

“He might have followed us stealthily,” she mused, evading his question. Noting the direwolf on the man’s chest, she crouched by his side, wiping the blood off the sword on his tunic. “On foot, most likely, else he would have drawn our attention.” She got to her feet and was about to get on the horse, when he stopped her. Grabbing her arm, he turned her to face him.

“Why?” he asked again. “That was a Stark man you just killed.”

“I told you,” she said, panting and red-faced from the strain. “I don’t serve the Starks. I serve Lady Catelyn. I promised her I’d get the girls back in return for you, and that’s what I’m going to do. Neither your death nor your capture is of any use to me.”

Quietened by her reasoning, he didn’t press any further. “Let’s move,” he urged, taking his place behind her as soon as she was on the steed, this time forgoing the chains and the ropes. “We’re short of time.”

When they made their way out of the clearing, Jaime steered the horse along a different route. “Where are we going?” She turned to him, surprised. “The Kingsroad is that way,” she said, pointing to a narrow pathway on her right.

“I know,” he nodded, accidentally pulling her into him as he steered the reins. “Our friend you just killed has made me change my plans. We’re dangerously close to Bolton territory, and knowing what they’re capable of, I wouldn’t want to be discovered anywhere in their vicinity.”

“So what do you propose?”

“Let’s take refuge in the village a little distance from here,” he explained, as he led the horse away from there. “Lie low for a while before we commence on the next leg of our journey.”

She looked at him, bewildered. Every minute wasted was a minute away from King’s Landing and closer to death, or worse still, capture. “Are you out of your mind, Kingslayer?”

Ignoring her, he continued steering the horse along the path he chose, leaving her fretting in silence,
knowing fully well that any opinion or words would only fall on to deaf ears. When they reached the settlement, they could spot people, mostly in ones and twos, presumably heading towards the morning market to peddle their wares.

“Excuse me,” he called out to a peasant who passed by, assuming the same fake accent again and his most polite tone. “My wife and I need shelter in your village for a day or two. Is there an inn nearby where we could get a room?”

The man looked at Brienne suspiciously. “Your wife?”

“Aye.” Jaime nodded amiably. “She’s pregnant, you see, and she’s been sick--” he paused “--morning sickness, and things like that,” he whined, looking at the man soulfully, presumably hoping for some sympathy. “If you could point us the right way, I’d be grateful.” Brienne could do nothing but clench her teeth and curse him in her mind for his lack of resourcefulness in coming up with a better story this time.

“There ain’t no inn here,” the man replied, still staring doubtfully at both of them. “But there’s a widow with a couple of children and more rooms to spare than she needs. She takes in travellers at times. You could ask her.” He pointed to his right. “You see that gate in the distance? That’s her.”

“Thank you,” Jaime said cheerfully, before riding off again.

Brienne was beside herself with the extent of his lie. She spun around, nearly bumping her head into his face. “Pregnant?” she cried out. “I thought you were mad, but you’re far beyond that. You're impulsive and foolish, you act before you think, least bothered about the consequences of your--”

He interrupted her. “Do you have a better plan?”

To that, she had no fitting retort and when she was quiet, he went on. “Since you don’t, why don’t you follow my instructions and just do as I say, hmm?”

“What do you mean?”

She groaned as a smile spread across Jaime’s face, for this could mean no good for her. “To begin with, why don’t you put on that gown again--”

“But--”

He raised his palm, silencing her. “Pregnant women don’t strut around in men’s clothes, covered in blood--”

“Don’t you forget, it was your life I saved,” she growled in anger, regretting her decision to rescue him.

“Regardless,” he said, crinkling his nose. “You’re covered in blood and reek of death. So it’s time we do something about it. We should disembark here.” He halted the mount next to a tree. “Why don’t you change behind those bushes while I wait for you here, my lady.” Getting off the horse, he helped her down and stood by her side, waiting for her to comply with his demands.

Wondering what she had done wrong in her life to be punished with such a fate, Brienne pulled out the stupid gown from the saddlebag and disappeared behind the trees, thinking how best to prevent the Kingslayer from destroying her mental stability and peace of mind.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

As they take refuge in the village, they are hit by a strange problem... with an equally strange solution.

“No matter how hard you try, you’ll never be able to pass off for a lady,” Jaime commented when the wench emerged from the bushes clad in the blue gown he had picked for her. His disdain mounting as he appraised her from top to toe, he had every intention to continue showering her with his usual barrage of insults, relishing the agitation that his remarks always drove her to. “Far from being suitable enough to be my wife--”

“I never claimed to be a lady, nor have I ever attempted to behave like one,” she snapped back, her aversion for social norms and conventions evident in her look of revulsion. “And if you mean being forced to pretend to be your wife, there’s nothing more sickening I’ve ever had to do in my life.”

She finds my company sickening… For reasons he wasn’t able to fathom, Jaime was overcome by a strong urge to defend himself. “I’m not half as bad as you portray me to be. I’ve travelled far and wide, wench,” he bragged, wanting to make her aware of his true worth. “And everywhere I’ve been, women--”

“--have always been throwing themselves at you,” she finished, giving him a look of contempt. “You’ve gloated about that a million times. If you could spare me from further stories about your conquests, Kingslayer, I’d be grateful.”

Slightly miffed with her dismissal, he suddenly felt the need to clear his name, for such an accusation was baseless and unwarranted when it came to him. “I boast of no such conquests, my lady,” he confided in her, proud of his resistance to stay away from such temptations. Women, more specifically whores were for Tyrion, not him. “I’m not one to be drawn to every second woman I meet, nor do I spend the loneliest of my nights with a tavern wench to warm my empty bed. I’m privileged enough to have found bliss with just one woman, the one I love.” He glanced at the sky wistfully, a painful ache filling his chest as he yearned for his sister. “The happiest moment of my life would be when I marry Cersei, when I take her hand in mine with all the seven kingdoms bearing witness to our union.” He sighed, unable to hide a smile as he pictured his sister’s pretty face.

He had finished securing the horse to the trunk and was about to make his way to the house they were directed to, when the wench’s crisp, curt voice shook him out of his daydream. “And you really hope for that to happen?”

He stopped, anger rising in his chest at her tone of disapproval. “The Targaryens have always married their sisters,” he argued, his eyes back on her disfigured face again. “There will, one day, come a time when other noble houses would find such an alliance acceptable.”

The wench stared back at him, her freckled forehead creasing into a frown. “You talk about marriage as if it’s your right. Have you forgotten that you’re still a member of the Kingsguard?” she questioned, the distaste in her eyes growing. “Or have you chosen to give up that vow after the death of King Robert?” A short pause later, she broke into a mocking smile. “My mistake, Kingslayer, I shouldn’t have been surprised at your confession. To a man who has earned his name by breaking
the most sacred of vows, how does it matter should he choose to repeat it again?"

Resisting the temptation to continue the argument, he contained himself to mentally despising every inch of her tall, strapping frame from the bottom of his heart. Her taunts stabbing him like a blade through the heart, it was despair he felt at first; despair at being labelled an oathbreaker for the solitary good deed to have come out of his sword. A minute later, anger followed, rage blinding him so much for a minute that he would have punched her on the nose. But what good would it be? *Try as I might, I can’t get her to look any uglier. That nose looks like it has seen terrible times, and nothing I can do would make it look any more grotesque.* Amusing himself for a while with visions of damaging her oddly-shaped nose and crooked teeth even further, Jaime calmed down, the anger inside him slowly melting away.

“You know nothing about me, wench,” he started again once he had regained his composure. “Do not try to judge something you’re ignorant of based on preconceived notions. You only know me as the world sees me today.”

“The world has judged you an oathbreaker, a title befitting your sins,” she carried on with her merciless attack on his character. “And that’s good enough for me to form an opinion of you, Kingslayer.” She made sure to stress on the word, her added emphasis never failing to poke his sensitivity.

*She’s only trying to provoke me further,* he said to himself, forcing himself to take deep breaths. Adverse reactions would do him no good. On the contrary, they would only strengthen her already marred opinion of him. *But why do I care about what she thinks of me? She’s just my bloody prisoner, an unavoidable means to get back home.* Irked with himself for attaching undue importance to what she thought, he kept quiet, searching for a fitting response to her tongue.

“Speaking about marriage—” he began, desperate to get the better of her in their petty game of insulting each other “—anyone who knows you happens to be well aware that no one wants to marry you.” He flashed her a smirk, while holding out his hand to help her walk.

“That’s none of your concern, Kingslayer.” Ignoring his hand, she limped past him, her injury still impeding her movements.

“You were once pledged to a knight.” At this, she spun around in surprise. “Ser Ronnet Connington, wasn’t that his name?” He met her eyes, watching her flush at the mention of the name. Satisfied, he fixed his gaze on her, relishing the impact his words were having on her. “And if I’m not mistaken, did he not turn his back on you?”

This was just a passing rumour Jaime had come upon, but the wench turned red, confirming the credibility of his claim. “You were no good for a knight like him,” he continued to slap her with his words. “No man worth his cock would even bother to look at you a second time, let alone stick it into your cunt—”

“Oh, I’d stick my cock anywhere but inside you, wench,” he felt like making his intentions clear. But her red face and fiery eyes were more than the revenge he wanted. Not wanting to ruin his sense of achievement, he said no more, chuckling to himself and striding ahead of her. Noticing the mild limp
she still had, he waited for her from time to time, allowing her to catch up until they came upon a moderately sized house, big enough to provide shelter to more than three, definitely superfluous for a family comprising of a widow and her two children.

When the door opened at his first knock, he decided to put on his gracious best. “Good day to you, my lady,” he greeted the petite figure that peered at him with mild curiosity. The woman seemed to be around forty, well-dressed and beautiful with an air of nobility around her that told him that she was high-born.

“Pardon me,” she answered with a polite smile and a look of admiration in her eyes as she took in his appearance. “I’m afraid, I don’t recognize you, Lord--”

“--Mormont,” he supplied, fervently hoping that she didn’t see through his bluff. “I’m one of Jeor Mormont’s nephews,” he continued hastily, careful not to spill out his fake first name. Throwing just the last name around was marginally safer than revealing one’s first name. “And this is my wife,” he introduced the wench, without bothering to think of a first name for her.

“Do come in, Lord Mormont.” She stepped aside to let them enter. “My lady,” she addressed the wench, looking at both of them alternately. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” she asked, when they were both seated and comfortable.

Jaime decided to unleash the story that he had been cooking up for a while. “My wife’s had a minor problem, Lady--” he paused, realizing that she had not given her name yet.

“Bracken,” the woman replied, gesturing to Jaime to go on with his story.

Another ally of the Tullys, he grumbled to himself, wondering if he would ever be completely rid of the boy king’s followers. Keeping aside his made up story for a moment, he decided to find out more about this strange woman. “Why aren’t you at Stone Hedge?” he asked her, genuinely surprised, for that was the seat of House Bracken. What was she doing here along the outskirts of the ruins of Harrenhal?

“My husband was killed in the war,” she began to explain, looking downcast. “He had married me against the wishes of his uncle, Lord Jonos. Tired of the feud with the Blackwoods, and unable to live in peaceful coexistence with my husband’s family after his death, I left his ancestral home to find some peace. This house and a small fortune are all my children and I have left, something my father left me.” she finished, staring into the distance.

Jaime couldn’t help but feel sorry for the widow. But before he could express his sympathy, she went back to her initial balanced demeanour. “So, what can I do for you, Lord Mormont?”

“My wife is with child.” He pointed to Brienne.

“My heartiest congratulations to the two of you.” Lady Bracken beamed at him. “I wish you a healthy heir, Lord Mormont. Would this be your firstborn?” she inquired good-naturedly.

“Aye.” Jaime nodded. “We’re on the way to Harrenhal,” he lied without abandon. “I’m taking her to her mother. I’m afraid, she’s had a nasty fall and has been facing some problems, a broken leg along with the usual pregnancy related--”

“Don’t worry, it’s just a phase,” said the woman comfortingly. “It’ll pass, she’ll be fine.”

Jaime took a second to picture Brienne of Tarth surrounded by a bunch of children, the vision leaving him thinking if any woman could be as misfit a mother as she appeared to be. “I was wondering if we could find a place to stay for a day or two,” he requested their hostess, wearing his
most charming grin. “I will obviously pay whatever rent you expect.”

The woman gave him a warm smile. She was so blatantly attracted to his good looks, that she was unable to keep her eyes off him for more than a second. “It would be my pleasure.” She got up, beckoning to them to follow her. “I live here with my daughters, and this house is big enough to be shared with weary travellers like you.” Leading them along a passage, she stopped when they came to a door. Opening it, she stepped aside, allowing Jaime to take a look at their new accommodation. Spacious and airy, it had everything necessary to comfortably house a married couple.

“I have no words to express my gratitude, Lady Bracken.” Taking her hand, Jaime kissed it with all the chivalry he could muster.

The woman’s smile widened as she blushed a deep red. “I must take leave of you.”

When they were finally alone in the room, Jaime let out a low whistle. “This is far more than what we need,” he observed, impressed. “At last, comfortable chambers and a proper bed to sleep on. What a welcome change in comparison to the dingy inns and--” He stopped when he caught a glimpse of the wench’s unhappy face. “What’s wrong?”

“Was there a need to be over-friendly?” Her hands on her hips and her legs spread as far away from each other as they could be, she looked as unladylike as the word could mean. “Did you really have to shower her with so much chivalry and affection?”

He merely shrugged. “It’s courtesy, my dear, but what would you know? You’re no knight.” He noticed her jaw stiffen, and instantly realized that he had once again touched a nerve. Having neither the strength nor the inclination for another squabble, he decided to placate her for a change. “I had to do that to gain her faith.”

“How did you not notice that she was unable to take her eyes off you?” she snapped, throwing him a dirty look. “She seems to be one of those women who’d do anything to impress you.”

Jaime grinned at her, unable to resist the chance to have a little laugh at her expense. “Jealous, my lady?” he teased. “Worried that your husband might abandon you for another woman?”

She scoffed. “Jealousy is one thing I’m pretty sure I would never harbour when it comes to you, my lord. I’m merely worried that she might see through your lie, or worse still, in a fit of admiration for her, you might reveal a bit too much,” she went on, her face flushed and her eyes flashing fire at him. “I wonder what women see in you,” she muttered to herself, but Jaime had caught her words.

He felt a pinch of disappointment at her easy disregard for him. “I’m a knight. I happen to be handsome, chivalrous and an accomplished warrior. What more could a woman want?”

“A bit of character and a conscience wouldn’t hurt, Kingslayer,” she seethed. “Both of which you so sorely lack.”

Now that stung like hell. What stabbed him more than her words was the annoying fact that there was truth in what she said. He had been detached from his conscience somewhere along the last few years... he had lost his way. As for his character, he had long forgotten that he even possessed such a virtue. Ever since it was tainted by an act of good looked upon as a crime by the world, he had given up all the remaining traces of decency in him and resigned to his new identity—that of a man without honour.

“It was neither your character nor your conscience that helped us out of our tricky situation, wench,” he said in feeble defence of himself. “What good are virtues that cannot aid you at the time of
“You mean your ability to lie your way through things?” she asked, a hint of disapproval in her voice. “That’s a skill I would never wish to possess.”

“I’m a Lannister,” he quipped. “We’re born with two things—the skill to talk our way out of problems, and gold.”

“Having squandered a good amount on these ridiculous clothes, you seem to be running a little short on the second,” she bit back.

He checked the gold in the pouch. “We have enough to pay her rent,” he replied, unwilling to let go of the argument, desperate as usual to have the last word. He got his wish. After one last glare at him, the wench turned her back to him, rummaging into the bag, searching for something.

“What’re you doing?” Alarmed that she might pull out the dagger and attack him, he grabbed her wrist without thinking and yanked her hand out of the bag. When all she held was a pair of breeches and her tunics, he gave her a sheepish look, still holding on to her wrist.

“Finding myself some proper clothes.” She jerked his hand away. “Did you really think I’d continue wearing this hideous piece of mess for days together?”

“You’re right,” he agreed thoughtfully. “We don’t know how long we might have to keep up this ruse, so one such dress wouldn’t suffice. Let’s head to the local market to buy you some more.”

Appalled by his suggestion, she opened her mouth to protest, but he left her no such chance. “After all, there are innumerable shades of blue, and since that’s the only colour which seems to make you a little lesser of an eyesore, why don’t we pick up one or two more—”

Only when he realized that there was no response, he noticed that the wench had disappeared into the bath, taking her regular clothes with her. Smirking, he discarded his boots and retired to the bed, his tired, aching body craving for some well needed rest. Sinking into the soft warmth of the mattress, he closed his eyes, surrendering to sleep, his head muddled with images of the wench wearing dresses in varying shades of blue.

Hours later, when Jaime opened his eyes it was twilight. Glancing around, he found himself alone in the room. The wench was nowhere to be seen. A cold wave of panic washed over him. *Has she managed to escape? Should I perhaps have kept her tightly bound... on a leash?*

Worried that she might give their game away, or worse still, get him captured, he got dressed quickly and left, hurrying to the spot where he had hidden their horse. But the mount was gone as well. *Damn!* Swearing to himself, he set out on foot, wondering where to look for her first. Having no better place to start with, he wandered into the market. Darkness was setting in, and the cloth merchants were busy winding up and shutting down for the day. He peeped into one or two such shops, but finding no sign of her, he left the place, dejected.

As he stood there wondering where to go next, his eyes fell upon their horse tied to a tree along a narrow road that ran parallel to the market. A stone’s throw away from where the animal was, stood a building, most likely a sept. Entering, he looked around, and to his relief, there she was, her eyes closed in prayer.

Impulse told him to grab her by the arm and drag her back to the house, to bind her in chains again, to berate her and mete out a punishment fitting enough to teach her a lesson. After all, she did make an attempt to abscond with their sole means of transport, but despite his brain pushing him hard towards such adverse actions, he couldn’t bring himself to mistreat her. Not having the heart to...
intervene, he waited, observing her from a distance as her lips moved wordlessly.

*She believes in the gods,* he thought to himself as he took in the soft, serene look that came upon her face as she continued praying. He stood there, transfixed, so engrossed in watching her that he failed to take notice when she opened her eyes.

“What’re you doing here, Kingslayer?”

He came out of his trance, his anger for her back in an instant as he recalled the reason behind seeking her out. “What the hell do you think you were doing?”

She approached him, her gait indicative of stubborn defiance. “What’s wrong in an occasional prayer?”

“Don’t lie to me, wench,” he barked. “Didn’t you try to get away from me while I was asleep?”

“Why would I do that?” she asked, narrowing her brows. “We both know quite well that sticking with you is the only way out of this nightmare for me.”

Jaime opened and closed his mouth like a fish, feeling utterly stupid for having misunderstood her. “Why did you leave without informing me? And why take the horse?”

“For this.” She picked up a package lying on the floor by the side and waved it under his nose. “I visited the market to buy myself some clothes. Your idea, remember?”

“I’m glad you decided to take my suggestion,” he remarked, wondering what could’ve caused her to change her mind after the initial vehement display of objection. “It is the duty of an obedient wife to abide by her husband’s wishes.”

Rolling her eyes, she glared at him for a second, abhorrence filling every inch of her ugly face. She stormed past him wordlessly, leaving him amused and smiling to himself as he followed her out.

They rode back to the house in silence. As usual, once Jaime had dismounted, he was about to help her down, but remembering how much she hated his offer of help, he held back, walking away without even looking at her. He had taken only a few steps when he heard a yelp of pain behind him.

Turning around, he saw the wench bent double, clutching her abdomen. Taking one look at her face twisted in pain, he retraced his steps, running towards her. Wrapping an arm around her waist and taking her hand in his, he helped her stand. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ll be fine,” she groaned. “Let me be.” She tried to push him away, but he held her tight, determined not to succumb to her stubbornness this time.

“I can’t,” he said firmly, supporting her as they stumbled to the door. He knocked, and as they waited, he hoped nothing was seriously wrong with her. He was counting on her for the successful completion of their journey, her well-being important if they had to make it to King’s Landing in one piece.

“Gods, what’s wrong with her?” Lady Bracken exclaimed as soon as she opened the door, her face ashen with fear as she took charge of walking Brienne to their room. “The first few months are the most critical, Lord Mormont,” she continued to speak as he followed her. “It is of utmost importance that you take good care of her during this period.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong,” Jaime wondered aloud, watching the two women disappear into the room. “We were just back from the market, and all of a sudden, she just collapsed in pain.”
When the wench had settled into the bed, he was about to follow them inside when Lady Bracken stood at the door, blocking his entry. “I’ll take care of her, my lord,” she stopped him in a polite, but firm tone. “There’s a maester nearby who could take a look at her--”

“I don’t need a maester,” Brienne protested, her eyes meeting his in a silent plea to keep her away from unwanted attention. “I just need some rest. I’ll be fine in a while. I’m just tired, that’s all.”

Taking the hint, Jaime decided to play by her wishes, wondering what the reason for her refusal of help could be. “Let’s wait until tomorrow, my lady,” he insisted, addressing his hostess. “I’ll take care of her tonight.” He paused to unleash his charm on the woman again, grinning at her as he spoke. “I’ll make sure to let you know if she needs any assistance. You’ve been so kind to us already, we don’t want to put you through any inconvenience.”

This time his ploy failed to have the desired effect on Lady Bracken, for she simply waved him away. “It’s no inconvenience. I’ve already sent my maid to summon the maester. He should be here any time--” She stopped abruptly, distracted by a sound behind him. “Ah, there he is,” she said, drawing attention to an elderly, wizened man who seemed to have decades of healing experience.

“Would you be kind enough to leave us, my lord?” the old man requested Jaime. “Lady Bracken can stay with me while I examine your wife.”

“That won’t be necessary,” the wench pleaded, her voice weak and low as she tried to get up. “I said, I’ll be--”

“Why don’t you just relax, my dear?” Lady Bracken gently pushed her down to the bed while Jaime was politely ushered away from the room by a maid.

As seconds rolled into minutes, Jaime paced around back and forth, his nervousness and the anxiety of what the wench was going through beginning to unnerve him.

What if something’s seriously wrong with her?

Why should I care about what happens to her, he thought, chiding himself for the unnecessary concern towards her. After all, she was just his captive, disposable and of no value to him after a few days. Even if she did happen to die on the way, he could always abandon her and make it back home. In such a sorry state, she would be more of a hindrance than a help to him.

Maybe this is a god given chance to be rid of her…

When he heard the door creak open, he wheeled around, his heart thumping loudly in anticipation of good news. Hope she’s fine, was the first thought that crept into his mind when he saw the maester and Lady Bracken exit the room with grim expressions on their faces.

He hurried to them, anxious to learn of the wench’s wellbeing. “How is she--”

“Who is she?” Lady Bracken interrupted, her tone suddenly devoid of its usual warmth.

Jaime was dumbfounded at the question. “I beg your pardon?”

“You lied to us. She’s not pregnant, Lord Mormont,” the woman went on, her eyes cold and distant. “Your wife’s pain and discomfort was because she just had her blood. Pain during such times is common, but it happened to be aggravated this time due to her travel.”

Jaime felt as if he had been struck on the face. This was something he was unprepared for, an unpleasant twist to the lie that he was overconfident would work.
She nodded to the maester who took their leave immediately. Once the old man had left, she turned her attention to Jaime again, eyeing him suspiciously. “I doubt that she’s your wife. So why don’t you tell me who you people are?”

Jaime thought feverishly, trying to quickly come up with another lie to cover up the mess he had given birth to. But before his brain could start working, he was surrounded by two armed men who had suddenly arrived at the house. As one of them strode towards the wench, Jaime made a quick note of the sigil on his cloak. *Flayed man of the House Bolton.* The knowledge of their identity filling him with a sinking sense of hopelessness and helplessness, he thought it wise not to open his mouth first this time.

The bigger of the pair, a tall bearded man peered at him closely. “You look familiar,” he grunted, frowning.

“So does the woman who claims to be his wife,” said the other, when he emerged from the room the wench was lying in. “If you can call that a woman.”

“He says he is Lord Mormont,” Lady Bracken informed them.

“I am,” Jaime insisted, stressing on his Northern accent in a desperate bid to convince them. Quickly hitting upon another plan, he went on to wear an expression of embarrassment. “I’m sorry, my lady, I…” he stuttered, pretending to blush “I.. we had to lie to you. There’s a reason behind my story.”

The three suspicious faces continued staring at him, waiting for him to go on.

“Jeyne--” he pointed to the room “--is her real name and she’s not my wife. She’s the woman I’m in love with.” Sighing heavily for effect, he went on. “I expressed my wish to wed her, but my uncle was against the match since she’s not of noble birth with no famous name to back her. Hence, we decided to elope.”

“Why lie to us?” Lady Bracken asked, still unconvinced.

“As soon as we left, my uncle sent his best men to find and take us back,” he continued bluffing. “They were the ones who ambushed us, who gave Jeyne her leg injury. Though we’ve managed to give them a slip, I’m afraid they’re still out there. If they manage to get us, her life is in danger.”

“I don’t believe him,” spat the bearded one. “He looks a lot like the Kingslayer, and the woman, his companion-the mannish wench who broke him free on Catelyn Stark’s orders--”

“If I were the Kingslayer, do you really think I’d be running around the Riverlands with a woman who isn’t my sister?” asked Jaime, hoping the men would find sense in his logic.

“He’s right,” said the other man nodding, looking moderately convinced. “Why don’t we give him a chance?”

“Are you mad? Do you think Locke would spare our lives if we let the Kingslayer slip out of our hands?” shouted the bearded man, his eyes bloodshot with fury. “I say, let’s capture these two and take them to him. He can decide their fate.”

His companion refused to agree. “If they ain’t who we suspect them to be, our necks might be at risk. Why not do one thing? Let’s put them to a test to find out who they actually are,” he suggested. He turned to Jaime. “If you really are who you say you are, why don’t you marry your woman?”

At this, Jaime froze, unable to find his tongue for a moment.
“What?” came a shocked voice from inside the room. The wench had come out, slightly pale but looking fine otherwise. She glared at Jaime. “What does he mean by—”

When he gave her a look that told her to shut up, she immediately stopped talking. He turned to the man who had made the suggestion, genuinely puzzled at the preposterous idea. “I don’t understand how this would be of any help to you.”

“It’s quite simple, Lord whoever-you-are. Jaime Lannister would never take an ugly woman such as this for a wife,” he explained, throwing the wench a condescending look. “The Kingslayer ain’t going to risk his reputation to break his vow to the Kingsguard for the second time, that too for a creature as pathetic as this one here,” the man went on. “I’ve heard he loves none but his sister, so he would never even look at another woman, forget about marrying her.”

“You seem to know a lot about the Kingslayer,” Jaime mused, masking his inner turmoil at his adversary’s uncannily precise prediction about him.

Ignoring him, the man continued. “So, my dear friend, marry this woman at dawn and walk out of this village a free man. Prove to us that you ain’t Jaime Lannister. Refuse my offer, and all you get is a trip to Harrenhal in chains.”

A long and unbearable spell of deafening silence followed, after which Jaime slowly nodded his consent, cursing his ill-luck as he spoke. “I wish for nothing more than to make her my wife,” he said, trying to sound cheerful. After all, he was to marry the love of his life, and a dismayed voice would only risk giving their game away. “I will wed her at daybreak.”

Lacking the nerve to face Brienne, he turned to Lady Bracken. “My lady, could we have an early night?” he requested her, wanting no more interference to an already eventful evening. “We’re tired, we’ve already had supper whilst we were out at the market.”

She didn’t look too happy with his suggestion. “Since you’re not married yet, I’m not sure if it’s appropriate for you to sleep on the same bed—”

Jaime decided to have no more of her authoritative nonsense. “She’s a maiden, my lady, and I give you my word that she will be one until I bed her after our wedding,” he assured her. “It’s better we stay together tonight.”

She nodded. “I’ll come for you at dawn.” She gave him a warm smile, going back to her usual friendly self again. “I hope you have a good night’s sleep.”

Ignoring the men who were still stationed outside the door, he followed the wench into the room. Once he had shut the door behind them, she turned her full fury on him. “What gave you the right to make such a commitment?”

“Keep your voice down, wench,” he warned. “Unless you want our lie—”

“--your lie,” she corrected him, her face livid with rage. “I never asked you to lie, nor do I approve of your doing.”

“My lie saved your ass that day, woman,” he was almost shouting now. “As it did today.”

“Come what may, I cannot marry you,” she declared, shaking her head vigorously.

“You have no choice.” He had no choice either. The only option in front of him was to convince her by hook or crook. “I reciprocate your feelings, and have no wish to wed you because our hatred is mutual. This is the worst thing that has, or ever could happened to me.”
“Why don’t we fight our way out of here? They’re two, and we’re two as well, so why can’t we cut them down and escape?” she suggested.

“Didn’t you hear him properly, wench?” He was surprised by her lack of attention to detail. “There’s a whole lot of Bolton men out there, waiting for instructions to capture us if we try anything stupid. There are some problems that cannot be dealt with violence... unless you want to be flayed alive.”

“I can’t consent to this,” she repeated, furiously stumbling back and forth the room ignoring her weakness. “I’m not made for marriage. My loyalties are with the Starks... and you are the bloody Kingslayer... the enemy!”

“I’m not madly in love with you either,” he shot back. “I love Cersei and I have every intention of terminating this marriage once I’m back to King’s Landing,” he fumed. “Hells, this is not even a real marriage!”

“There has to be another way out,” she lamented, plonking herself on the bed wearily.

“Can you think of a better idea, my lady?”

Silence.

“Do you agree to play along then?”

More silence.

She spoke again after a while. “As that man rightly pointed out, what happens to your Kingsguard vow? What would the implications be should you break your sacred oath to enter into matrimony?”

That precise thought had begun nagging Jaime the minute he announced his decision. Breach of his vow was punishable by death. “I don't know,” he lied. “Father would find a way out of this. He always has a solution. So let's see...”

Leaving his fate to Tywin Lannister and his shrewdness, Jaime decided not to think too much about the future. If marrying the wench would save their skins for the time being, then so be it.
Brienne lay awake for what seemed like eternity, staring vacantly at the ceiling. When she had set off on Catelyn Stark’s orders dragging the Kingslayer along, she had not expected the journey to be a cozy bed of roses. There would be thorns, she knew, and thorns there were, her capture at his hands proving to be her biggest hindrance. What had she failed to envisage was this strangely nasty turn of events!

Marriage… and that too to him... Of all the men alive in the seven kingdoms, he’s the one I’m eventually going to be stuck with!

Death, bondage, incarceration and even torture… all of these she had been prepared to endure, but being forced into matrimony with the man she despised, more so her sworn enemy was not something she could easily come to terms with.

“Still awake, wench?” came his muffled voice from the other end of the bed.

“What else do you expect after everything you did?” she grumbled, fighting to keep her voice to a whisper, angry with him for the lie that was the cause of all this chaos.

Her soon-to-be husband sat up, his face clearly visible in the thin streak of moonlight that poured through the window. “You’re so bloody ungrateful.” Even in the pale light, the displeasure on his face was unmistakable. “If the best you can do is blame me for saving your life--”

“Was there a need to exaggerate matters beyond proportion?” Wide awake, she sat upright. “You could’ve refrained from telling them that I was pregnant!”

“All I wanted was to garner some sympathy.” He shrugged. There was not even the faintest hint of regret on his face. “What better way to achieve that than to pretend to be traveling with a pregnant wife? Obviously, I never expected it to take such a drastic turn. Now we have no choice but to play by the situation, to convert this threat into an opportunity and make the most of this chance to get away from here.”

His calm and composed manner of dealing with this predicament left her aghast. “Opportunity?” she repeated, stunned by his way of perceiving the situation. “You call being bound to you for life in exchange for my freedom a bloody opportunity ?” She shook her head in exasperation. “An opportunity for… what exactly? Because Boltons or not, I’m still your captive, remember?”

“Only until we reach King’s Landing.”

“Sadly, that’s not the case anymore,” Brienne lamented. “Come dawn, I’d be bound to you for life,” she whined, the prospect filling her with disgust.

“If you think I’m going to honour this so-called marriage for life, you don’t know me well enough, wench!” He sounded as displeased and upset as her. “A marriage by coercion, as long as it’s un consummated can be annulled by an appeal to the High Septon,” he declared. “And that’s the first
thing I’m going to do as soon as we ride into King’s Landing.”

“I’d be indebted to you for that,” she said icily. “Nothing’s worse than being known as the Kingslayer’s wife. I’d rather have married Ser Humphrey Wagstaff had I known I’d have to settle for worse,” she added as an afterthought just to spite him.

To her surprise, far from being offended, he actually looked intrigued. “Wasn’t he the one you insisted should beat you in a duel?” he inquired, his voice laced with curiosity. “That was one of your conditions to the wedding, wasn’t it?”

“The only condition,” she admitted. “How do you happen to know so much about my life, Kingslayer?”

“Just heard about you in passing,” he replied dismissively. Of course, what else could it be!

As if she were important enough for him to seek out information about her. “You can be glad about one thing, wench.” His tone had a teasing edge to it. “I happen to have fulfilled the condition you set your father. Lord Selwyn would certainly approve of a knight who defeated his daughter,” he bragged.

“My father would prefer I die than marry an honourless oathbreaker like you,” she shot back, glaring at him. “And I’d obey him if he had any say in this.”

“Nonsense,” Jaime countered. “You father would consider himself lucky if you found yourself a husband… even a worthless oathbreaker like me would be more than welcome, for something’s always better than nothing.”

“I’d rather accept death as a better fate than something like this,” she replied, unwilling to give in to his ridiculous logic. “Even if it would please my father.”

“I’m afraid neither of us have a say in our fates,” he said, stating the ultimate truth they were both heading towards.

“Easier for you to say, Kingslayer.”

“What do you mean by that?” he asked, sounding annoyed. “How, do you think, I can convince Cersei? And my father? What do you imagine he’d say if he knew I married an ugly wench like you behind his back? All these years, he’s been trying to persuade me to wed, bringing before me the most beautiful, most eligible noblewomen the kingdom can boast of. The kind of shock he’d get when he sees you…” he trailed off, biting his lip in rage.

“So that’s what you’re worried about,” she concluded, making an effort to hide her disappointment. “That my looks would be a disgrace to your family.” Hurt for the first time by his scathing words, she tried not to show it in her expression. She could not let him know that his mockery affected her.

“Undoubtedly,” he went on in the same condescending vein. “We Lannisters have been renowned for our beauty for generations. I only wish my father doesn’t disown me for bringing in a daughter-in-law such as you,” he said scathingly.

“In that case, why don’t you have the balls to pick up your sword and confront those men? I’m sure they’re no match for a reputed warrior like you,” she goaded him. “Or, is defeating women like me your only noteworthy achievement?” She paused to draw a breath. “Apart from killing unarmed kings by stabbing them in their backs,” she finished, satisfied with the intensity of the insult.

He said nothing for a few seconds. If he took offense to her accusation, he didn’t show it. “Valour doesn’t necessarily mean you have to take stupid decisions, my lady,” he explained, his pitch now back to normal. “That’s the difference between you and me. You’re brave, maybe even more than I
am, but stupid. You’d risk your life to avoid a small lie, even if it could save your neck. That’s not what life always expects you to do.”

“I’m not here for life lessons from you, Kingslayer!”

“You could do with a few,” he advised. “Anger is not always the solution for everything.”

“Nor is lying,” she hit back.

“You’re not only stupid, but stubborn as well.”

To that, Brienne knew well not to respond. Lying down again with her back to him this time, she kept quiet for a while, pretending to sleep, using that as an excuse to avoid engaging in further conversation with him.

“You can’t fool me, wench,” wafted his voice again after a long spell of peaceful silence. “I’ve been sleeping next to you for days. You snore like hell when you’re deep in sleep. You’re noisier than the loudest squire I’ve had the misfortune to put up with,” he groaned, revealing something that she was hitherto unaware of, his keen sense of observation taking her by surprise, while leaving her blushing at the same time.

“I’d appreciate it if we could refrain from discussing my sleeping habits,” she muttered into her pillow, her cheeks burning with embarrassment, glad that he couldn’t see her face right now.

“Oh, that’s something we have to start getting used to, my lady,” he said cheerfully. “Beginning tomorrow night, we’re going to be husband and wife. Since we have to share a bed, we might as well get to know each other better, and that includes sleeping habits and other intimate—”

She sat bolt upright, staring at him, mortified by his suggestion. “Just because I’ve been forced into playing this stupid game with you, do not presume to believe that we would actually be married,” she snapped. “Nothing would ever give you the right to treat me like a wife,” she made herself clear. “Not even the bloody words of a Septon.”

Jaime guffawed at her reaction. “You can’t even take a small joke!” he exclaimed, his words punctuated by peels of laughter. “I can’t believe the gods have chosen such a boring wife for me.” When she continued glaring at him, he mellowed down, adopting a soft, placating tone this time.

“Calm down, wench. Take my word when I say that I’m as appalled and worried with the prospect of our union as you. But whining about it isn’t going to make it any more tolerable.”

“Nothing’s ever going to make it tolerable,” she moaned, more to herself, lying down again, this time making up her mind not to succumb to him again.

“I’m not that bad, wench,” she heard him murmur as she turned away, facing the wall. She was wise enough not to answer him, for that would only end up fueling the fire.

And so she lay there, trying not to toss and turn too much for fear of inviting further conversation from him. All she could do was gaze intently at the wall, picturing her future, dreading what being the Kingslayer’s wife would be like. In a few hours, I’ll be Lady Lannister, she thought, her skin crawling at the prospect. She had heard a million stories about Tywin Lannister from her father. Would he really react the way Jaime had described when he met her? Would Cersei try to have her killed out of jealousy? Such ominous thoughts and more floating through her mind, she closed her eyes, surrendering to her fatigue. Tired that she was because of her blood loss, it didn’t take her much longer to drift into a disturbed, turbulent sleep, troubled by dreams of married life with Jaime and the visions of their many unborn children.
She woke up with a start when there was a loud pounding on the door. Stretching her arms to get rid of her sleep, she glanced out of the window, noticing that the sun was just beginning to show up. Jaime was fast asleep by her side, snoring like a giant, his slumber unaffected by the problems that lay in store for them the moment they left this room.

Straightening her clothes, she strode across to open the door.

“How’s our bride-to-be doing?” Lady Bracken gushed, throwing an arm around Brienne. “Had a good night’s sleep?”

“Y… yes,” she stuttered, unsettled for a moment at being referred to as a bride.

“Good,” she said, thrusting a package into her arms. “Here are some clothes for Lord Mormont. He’s about the same size as my husband, and I’ve been thinking you both may not have anything appropriate for a wedding—”

“Thank you, my lady,” Brienne said hurriedly, eager to get the nosy woman out of her sight.

“I’m afraid, I couldn’t find anything your size.” Was that a criticism? Or merely a delivery of information?

“That’s quite alright,” Brienne said with a smile. “I do have a couple of dresses that I bought last evening. I could wear one of them.”

“That’s settled then,” their hostess declared gleefully, rubbing her hands. “Why don’t you wake up your handsome lord so that you both can be ready in an hour’s time. I’ll come again to fetch you.”

My handsome lord indeed! Rolling her eyes, Brienne made her way towards Jaime. “Get up,” she whispered in his ear, taking care not to touch him.

There was no response. The snores came as loudly as before.

“Wake up, Kingslayer,” she shouted this time, but it was of no use. He stirred slightly, only to turn to the other side and go back to sleep. Having no other choice, she bent, her fingers shaking as she touched his arm. “Get up for god’s sake,” she yelled again, shaking him violently.

He flipped to her side, his eyes fluttering open. “Good morning, wench.” He smiled lazily, taking her in from top to toe, his gaze sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. She pulled her hand away immediately, drawing away to maintain a respectable distance. “I could get used to being woken up by my wife every morning,” he remarked, sitting upright, his eyes still locked on her in an appraising manner.

Brienne bit her lip, hoping he would look away. “I’m no--”

“--wife of mine,” he said, voicing her exact thoughts. “I don’t need to be reminded of that repeatedly, my lady. Learn to take a joke in your stride at times, for your own sake.”

With that, they both resigned to an unspoken agreement of peace, each of them busy getting dressed for the ceremony. Brienne was the first to bathe, and when Jaime was in the bath, she tried on one of the gowns she had bought yesterday.

Never one to have bothered looking into a mirror or fussing about her appearance, she gathered the courage to face her reflection, apprehensive about how she might look in the dress. Critically studying herself, she concluded that no matter what she donned, she would be as mannish as ever. Nothing could ever change that, not even the prettiest dresses sewn by the best seamstresses in
Westeros could make her look like a woman. At least it isn’t ill-fitting, she observed. There was one problem however, which she noted when her attention was drawn to the neckline. It was too deep for her comfort, the curves of her breasts enhanced by the cut and distinctly visible. That’s something I hadn’t anticipated, she thought ruefully, cursing herself for having overlooked this aspect when she had chosen it. But there wasn’t any other option now, for this was all she had, and this was what she had to wear.

The door of the bath swung open. She turned around. Out came Jaime, clad in a bathing robe, his neck and the top of his chest exposed and in full view. His eyes on the ground, he wiped his dripping hair dry with a towel. “Are you dressed--”

It was only when he glanced up at her that he stopped dead, tongue-tied as his eyes wandered all over her body, lingering a bit longer at her chest. She squirmed in discomfort. “You look--” he paused, perhaps racking his brain for the right kind of insult to hurl at her “--hideous,” he concluded. “As unladylike as always, no matter what you wear.”

“I’m flattered by the compliment,” she replied in a cold tone. This was something she had expected, for he had made critical remarks about her meagre breasts when he had first met her. But what hit her unexpectedly was the sight of his bare skin. The Kingslayer was handsome, no doubt, but she didn’t want to be one of those women who blatantly admired his beauty. “Now if you could do me a favour and put on something appropriate--” she threw him the package Lady Bracken had given her “Your dear lady, our hostess has sent you her love in the form of some clothes.”

Whistling a tune, Jaime unwrapped the package to uncover a white shirt, a pair of trousers, a doublet and a cloak, both in red and gold, for House Bracken’s colours were red and gold too, not unlike the Lannisters. The cloak had their sigil embroidered on it - a red stallion on a gold field. “That’s not too far from my house colours,” he observed, undoing his robe to try out his new clothes.

The moment he began stripping, Brienne hastily looked in the opposite direction, pretending to adjust her dress. “I’m done,” he called out after a while. “You can look now, wench.”

And when she turned to him, she gulped, taking in the man standing in front of her. So this is what he’d look like if he dressed in full Lannister splendour, she concluded. He caught her staring before she could avert her eyes and threw her a mischievous smirk. “So, wench--” he began in his usual scathing tone, but was interrupted by a knock on the door.

Relieved at the distraction, she let Lady Bracken in, not missing the fact that the woman had eyes only for Jaime. She couldn’t stop gazing longingly at him. “You look fine, my lord,” she gasped, completely ignoring Brienne who was in the same room. “Your lady is one lucky woman.”

“You’re so kind to have found me such wonderful clothes, my lady,” he said graciously, earning a blush from her.

“It’s nothing,” she waved him away. “They’re my husband’s and they’ve just been lying there, rotting away after his death. Since you’re the same size as him, I thought, why not put them to use? This was what he had worn for our wedding.”

“I’m honoured,” Jaime whispered, kissing her hand.

The woman pulled herself together, finally sparing Brienne a glance. “It’s time,” she urged, leaving the room.

“Should you have to do that everytime?” Brienne turned to him in irritation, irked by his behaviour.
He looked at her closely. “Do what? Kiss her hand?”

“Not just that,” she tried to cover up the way her objection sounded. “Are you this overly friendly to every lady you meet?”

He nodded, tossing her another playful grin. “Everyone except you,” he quipped. “Because you’re--”

“--no lady,” she finished, anticipating what he was about to say. “I know. I don’t need to be repeatedly reminded of that.”

They rode together on the same mount they had arrived on, heading towards the Sept as the sun broke through the clouds, bathing them with its golden rays. Something had been nagging Brienne for long and it was time to address the matter.

“There’s a problem,” she began abruptly, half-expecting a sarcastic reaction.

“What’s wrong?”

She turned to him, her face flushed with embarrassment as she wondered how to broach the subject. “The bedding ceremony--” she finally blurted out, hoping he’d take a hint about what she meant to say.

“Don’t worry about that.” There was neither sarcasm nor mockery in his voice. “I’ve taken care of it. I had a word with Lady Bracken requesting her that there be no bedding ceremony today.”

She was surprised. “But how--”

“Simple solution, wench,” he went on to explain. “Since you’re bleeding, I told her that having our bedding tonight would be a--” he made a face “--messy affair. I said, I’d make you mine later. So, have no fear, no one’s going to touch you tonight.”

No one including you, I hope… This fear, she did not voice, not for now atleast. “Thank you,” was all she said, the rest of their journey to the Sept continuing in silence.

Once they reached their destination, everything seemed to be happening at twice its regular pace. She stood at the entrance as if in a trance, unable to move, an unknown fear gripping her chest. Looking around, she found that thankfully there weren’t any villagers, except for Lady Bracken and her daughters along with the two men who had accosted them last night. Soon enough, she found herself being ushered towards the altar as she was made to stand alongside Jaime with the Septon facing them.

This is really happening, she thought, her heart sinking as the Septon began speaking his words, none of which Brienne could register, her mind far away as her nervousness mounted. She wasn’t even paying attention when he instructed them to begin their vows.

“He’s talking to us, my lady,” Jaime hissed between clenched teeth. “Vows, now!”

Taking a deep breath and summoning all the courage she could, she resigned to fate with a short prayer to the seven, begging them to soon free her of this undesirable bond as the Septon tied their hands together. It was time for her vows… and there was no escape.


I am his, and he is mine… from this day until the end of my days…
She was barely listening when Jaime simultaneously spoke the same words. Nor did she focus when he placed his cloak on her shoulders.

“Kiss her,” cried out one of the Bracken girls the second the Septon had proclaimed them husband and wife.

Her words brought Brienne to a state of full mental alertness, and she looked Jaime in the eye, silently requesting him to refrain from complying with the girl’s demand.

“I can’t help it, wench,” he breathed, so softly that he was audible to no one but her. “Just this once, bear with me,” he implored, his eyes now pleading with her, seeking her cooperation. “It’ll be over before you know it.”

Not wanting any trouble in public, she reluctantly blinked her consent, shutting her eyes tightly as she awaited the ill-fated contact. When it came, it was just a brush of his lips on hers, a ghost of a touch. It felt strange, for she had never been in such close proximity with anyone before, the prospect of a kiss definitely out of bounds for someone as ugly as her. After all, which man in his senses would want to lock lips with her? Fortunately it lasted for just a second, he was barely there and then he withdrew before she could fully sense his presence, leaving her standing there with her cheeks burning.

“See,” he said, as they walked out of the Sept with Lady Bracken’s family at their heels. “I told you it wouldn’t be that bad. You’re still alive.”

“Believe me,” she hissed, smiling through her anger for the benefit of the people around her. “Nothing’s more repulsive than kissing the man you loathe.”

“Oh, that wasn’t a kiss, my lady.” His voice was suddenly a deep, throaty growl and he looked into her eyes, causing her skin to erupt into goosebumps. “I can show you what a real kiss is once we’re back alone in our chambers,” he offered, his eyes never leaving hers as he spoke.

“Not interested,” she barked, breaking out of his gaze once the initial shock of the moment had passed, the thought of his lips on hers filling her with dread.

Sensing her anger and discomfort, he broke into a grin. “You thought I was serious about it, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t,” she mumbled, her face on fire.

“Of course you did,” he teased. “Look at you, all flustered as if I’m going to grab you right now and kiss you.”

She was saved from answering him by Lady Bracken, who insisted that they return to her house for a wedding feast in their honour.

“That would be too much of a trouble for you, my lady,” Brienne tried to evade her offer. “In fact, I was just telling my lord husband that we ought to resume travel right away.” She glanced at Jaime for help, but he simply shrugged.

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“Everyone’s entitled to a wedding feast, Lady Mormont, it’s the least I can do for you,” Lady Bracken insisted, looking straight at Jaime though it was Brienne she was speaking to. “So come along now. You should stay with us for a couple of days and then you can be on your way. Where’s the hurry?”

The feast was an elaborate affair, though it was just the two of them in addition to Lady Bracken’s
family. Only now did Brienne notice the Bracken girls properly. The elder one, Kyra, was about ten and four, pretty as her mother and almost a woman. The younger, Alessa, was probably seven or eight, cheerful and talkative with an angelic smile that could brighten up a room.

“How did you two fall in love?” asked Kyra all of a sudden, catching them unawares.

In a fix, Brienne stole a glance at her new husband. Let me take care of this, his eyes seemed to tell her.

“It’s a long story, my lady,” Jaime replied, giving Kyra a charming smile.

“I love stories,” chimed in little Alessa, putting her fork aside and waiting for him to continue.

“Very well then,” he began, sitting back in his chair, ready to spin a yarn once again for the benefit of the children. Brienne waited with bated breath as to what bunch of lies he would conjure this time.

“There once lived a little girl in a far-off island. She was nothing like other little girls her age. She hated dressing up, loathed music and embroidery and everything else girls your age love to do. That little girl was--”

“--Lady Mormont!” shouted Alessa, immediately looking at Brienne. “I don’t like embroidery too,” complained the child, her eyes bearing a soulful look. “But mother makes me learn--”

“Do you want to listen to the story or not, Alessa?” her mother interrupted in a warning tone that immediately quietened the girl.

“So this girl Jeyne loved riding, playing with the boys and learning how to wield a sword. Being a warrior was all she wished for, but that was the only thing her father denied her,” Jaime went on, making Brienne shoot him a sharp look. “Her father was no lord, but he wanted to bring her up such that she could be a proper little lady, to grow up and marry a handsome lord--”

“She married you,” this time Kyra stopped him. “You’re a handsome lord,” she added on an after-thought, looking at him in admiration.

“Aye, she did,” said Jaime patiently. “But not before her father searched far and wide for a suitable husband for her.”

At this, Brienne was at the edge of her seat, her anxiety growing every second. Why the hell is he going on and on with this? Being insulted by him in private is bad enough, what wrong had she done him to deserve a public humiliation such as this?

“When this little girl grew up to be a maiden fair, many men came to seek her hand, but none of them were worthy of her. Tired of them all, Jeyne promised her father that she would marry the next man he brought before her, but on one condition,” said Jaime, leaving them curious for more.

Brienne gaped at him in astonishment. Here she was, thinking he would decry her for being rejected by her suitors, but the story he made up, though hers was being presented in a manner she had never once imagined.

“What was her condition?” whispered Kyra.

“She insisted that the first man to defeat her in a sword-fight would be the one she would marry.”

“What happened after that?” Alessa asked, eager for him to go on.

“She met a handsome lord--”
“You!” cried Alessa again, her enthusiasm undiminished.

“Yes, she met me at a feast. While I had heard a lot about her skills, I wanted to see for myself. So I challenged her to a duel.” He threw Brienne a discreet wink before he went on. “We fought for a while, danced around each other as our swords kissed, each an equal match for the other—”

“And then?” Kyra urged, obviously impatient to skip the details and move to the important part.

“After many long and difficult minutes of outstanding swordplay from her, I had her yield to me,” he finished, once again throwing Brienne a knowing smile. “And she did. Floored by my skills, she fell in love with me.”

That’s the only lie here, thought Brienne, looking down at her plate as all eyes were now on her.

“Look at her, her face is all red,” pointed Alessa, making Brienne want to hide under the table in shame. “She loves him. My septa told me that if a lady loves a man, her cheeks turn red.”

“Of course she loves him,” said her sister, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “That’s why she’s blushing.”

“And that, my dear ladies, is how we fell in love,” Jaime concluded his tale, earning a resounding applause from both the girls.

“That is by far, the most romantic love story I’ve ever heard,” gushed Lady Bracken. “You’re lucky to have gained a husband like him, Lady Mormont,” she added, giving Brienne an envious look.

Unsure of what to say, Brienne simply smiled politely, fighting to keep herself from blushing any further. These girls and their mother were going to be the death of her. If there was one thing that surprised her, it was Jaime. She had not even in her wildest dreams imagined that the ruthless Kingslayer could be so easygoing with children. If Stannis was to be believed, all of Cersei’s brood was his. For a fleeting moment, she felt sorry for him. What good was fathering children if he couldn’t call them his or give them his name?

After the food and drink was cleared, they sat there chatting till late into the evening. An hour or two to go and it would be supper time. Content with the heavy lunch they had partaken, Brienne decided to skip dinner and retire to bed early. “Would you be kind enough to excuse me, Lady Bracken?” she requested her hostess, keen to get away from there and back to the comfort of her solitude. “I’d like to call it an early night.”

Lady Bracken nodded. “By all means, my lady. Consider this your home.”

Brienne turned to Jaime. “I’ll be with you in a while,” he said, answering the question in her mind.

Once Brienne was back in their chambers, a new level of anxiety was beginning to engulf her. Soon Jaime would be in. They would have to share a bed, this time as man and wife. So engrossed she was in thinking of a way to address this issue that she didn’t hear the door click open behind her.

“Don’t worry, wench, I’m not going to touch you,” he reassured her, taking one look at her stiff and uncomfortable perch on the bed.

Far from comforting her, his arrogant air of assurance only enraged her. How dare he think he can take advantage of me! “My being your wife doesn’t automatically give you the right to touch me, Kingslayer,” she barked, making her stand clear lest he might be mistaken.

“It does, but I’m not interested,” came another smug reply.
“Good for you,” she grunted. “You couldn’t lay a finger on me even if you were interested.”

“I could,” he said, his voice oozing with masculine confidence. “But I wouldn’t.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” she argued, her agitation and nervousness mounting. She was yet to assess his full strength. What if he tried to claim his rights as her husband and force himself on her?

He strode across the room and came to her side of the bed. “I could take you right now on this bed if I wanted to,” he whispered, bending down and leaning into her.

Determined not to succumb to this intimidation, she maintained a bold stand, looking him defiantly in the eye. “Try forcing yourself on me, and we’ll see--”

“Oh, who said anything about forcing myself on you?” he growled, sitting down next to her. “I was talking about unleashing the fullest extent of my charms on you. If I do that, I’d have you under me within minutes. I’m ready for that kiss if you’re interested, my lady,” he offered again, his eyes boring into hers and his voice dangerously seductive as he moved his face close to hers.

Dazed for what was probably a few seconds, she soon came to her senses. Enough is enough, she decided once her mind had begun working. “Get away from me, Kingslayer,” she shouted, pushing him away. “Try anything funny and you’ll find a few of your teeth missing in the morning.”

“I was just teasing you, wife.” Smirking, he went back to his position at the other end of the bed. “There’s nothing more repulsive than fucking the woman you loathe,” he said, mirroring the tone she had used earlier. “So, I’m coming nowhere near you. Sleep in peace, my lady.”

And that’s what she did. Without even bothering to change, she settled down to her side and closed her eyes, letting her weary body relax. I pray to you, she addressed the gods as she drifted into unconsciousness, get me out of this mess and away from this man soon…

She opened her eyes to the sound of the door opening. Knowing better than to make even the slightest noise, she held her breath and waited for the intruder to enter. When the door shut with a soft click, she slowly got up, her hand reaching for the dagger under her pillow. In the semi-darkness she couldn’t clearly see who it was, but the figure seemed to be facing the other side, and he had not spotted her yet. She moved stealthily towards him, and once she was within an arm’s distance from her adversary, she lunged at him.

But before she could attack, she was overpowered and pinned to the door, his body keeping her in place against it whilst his palm was on her mouth to prevent her from screaming.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, wench?”

Hearing the voice, she relaxed her body in relief. But he had not taken his hand off yet. Let go of me, she tried to say, but all that came out of her mouth was an incoherent, muffled sound.

Jaime, however, seemed to understand. “Promise me you wouldn’t attack,” he said, his eyes falling on the dagger in her hand.

She nodded in a hurry, and he took his palm off her mouth. She took a moment to catch her breath. “What were you doing outside at this hour?” she asked.

“I had gone to bring back our swords,” he breathed into her face. “I had hidden them in the garden last evening for fear of our true identities being discovered.”

A moment later, she once again stiffened when she realized that his body was still pinned to hers, the
gap between them close to nothing. He smelled of leather and sweat, and strangely while that should have been obnoxious, it had set off a pleasant tingling sensation at the pit of her belly.

“Let go of me,” she repeated, desperate to get away from him, keen to get rid of this new-found discomfort his closeness caused her.

“You’re the one clinging tightly to me, my lady,” he said, his voice a low whisper in her ear.

Only then did she realize that she had one arm around his neck while her other hand rested below his collarbone, her fingers teasing the hair on his chest through the gap in his open shirt.

“I… I’m sorry,” she murmured, jerking her hands off him immediately. When he let go of her, she quietly went back to bed, placing the knife back in its place.

She attempted to go back to sleep, hoping for tomorrow to be a less embarrassing day.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Bedroom talk, banter, bickering, awkward situations... and more.

Relieved when the wench had finally relinquished her hold on him after spending an excruciatingly long moment in his arms, Jaime stood by the door, watching her settle down to sleep once again. What she had just done, though innocent and only in self-defence, had a completely unexpected effect on him. The strange sensations it evoked in him, acting in conflict with his inherent anger and distrust towards her left him rooted to the spot, confused.

Anger was understandable, his loathing for her which had only increased after their wedding left him all the more determined to put an end to this ordeal at the earliest. *The way she looks at me at times,* he recalled, *as if I'm a predator waiting to pounce on her... as if fucking her is all I'm bloody interested in!* Try as he might, he couldn’t forget the look of revulsion on her face when he had kissed her. If only she knew how good a kiss he could oblige her with, she would change her opinion about that. *But, thank the gods, I'll never have to prove that to her,* he thought, relieved, for locking lips with her would be the most disgusting thing he could ever imagine. *Wedding vows and this stupid game be damned,* he decided, *I'm never going to get within an arm's length of her ever again.* This marriage was a necessary evil, and that was what it would be, and only until he got home and back to Cersei’s arms and her bed.

Alarmed, he couldn’t help thinking about the way his body happened to react to the wench's touch. When he had flung her to the door and pressed her against it, his pulse had rapidly quickened, leaving him nearly breathless. When her warm breath had touched his face, his gaze had dropped to her shapeless, chapped lips and the ugly scar over it, the sight of it sending a rush of excitement through him. So close he was to her, that he could count every freckle on her face and every hair on her eyebrow. All he could do now was hope that she hadn’t taken note of his heavy breathing when her fingernails had scraped against his chest.

That apart, he was hit by the frustrating realization that he was subconsciously drawn to her eyes like a moth towards light. *Damn those things, they always seem to pierce through my soul when she looks at me.* Making matters even worse was the way he had gaped at her that morning, as if he’d never set eyes on a woman’s bosom before! Not that he was interested in knowing what lay beneath that plunging neckline, he didn’t need her to be naked to make out that her breasts were pathetically meagre. Even if what she had could qualify as breasts, they had nothing in them to entice a man like him. That dress was a bad idea, for if not anything else, it only made her look uglier.

*I'm missing Cersei too much,* he concluded, convincing himself that this was the reason for his unbidden thoughts.

Satisfied with this self-explanation, he ambled towards the bed, getting on to his side and under the blankets. No sounds of snoring, he observed, as soon as he sat down beside her, which meant she was still awake.

“Are you still awake, or have you decided to do me the favour of sparing me of your obnoxious snores?” he began, overcome by a sadistic urge to goad her into an argument.
“Nothing’s more unfortunate than having to spend the night next to a man you’re forced to call husband,” she grumbled, her voice muffled as she spoke into the pillow. “A man worthy of nothing, but hatred.”

“Better than ending up as a feast for the crows, don’t you think?” he retaliated, pouncing on the provocation. Used, though to her prejudice he was, in the depths of his heart he was struck by a tiny ache, one that was triggered by the thought that a woman wed to him would consider herself this unfortunate. The wench, of course, is no wife of mine, he consoled himself, pushing that pricking feeling away.

“I never knew you slept with weapons under your pillow,” he remarked, quickly changing the subject.

“Are you worried—” came the immediate reply, her voice bearing it’s usual crisp clarity with no hint of sleep, indicating that she too was wide awake “—that I might stab you while you sleep?” Though unable to see her as she faced away from him, he could hear the bitterness in her tone.

“Why don’t you try doing that again, my lady?” he challenged. “Just as you did a while ago.” He sat up, and shifting closer to her, he bent and whispered into her ear. “I’m sure, I could overpower you and pin you down to the bed if you happened to attack me,” he threatened her, his pulse beginning to race again and out of his control. “I’m looking forward to another opportunity to match my skills against yours, my sweetling.”

Nothing like a good fight to keep the spirits up… and what’s better than putting down the wench to get a feel of sweet, sweet victory? A worthy opponent and nearly his equal in swordplay, courage and strength, nothing would make his heart soar and his blood sing than another chance to vanquish her and put her in her place.

She sat up with a jerk, the bed shaking with her sudden movement. Her face now on the same level as his, her eyes shone brighter than the brightest sapphires he had ever seen. “Do not call me that again, Kingslayer,” she said softly, glaring at him as she spoke. “I am not your sweetling.”

Jaime burst out laughing. “I’m afraid I might have to for the benefit of our hosts,” he said, amused that one word could cause her so much agitation. “Worry not, for I do not think of you as sweet. Far from it, actually, for you’re as sour as sour could be and as bitter as—”

“Enough,” she barked. “I get your point.”

“Would you rather I stick to wench, my dear?” he teased, unwilling to let go, for watching her burn with fury filled him with an immense sense of achievement.

“I have a name,” she announced, her tone filled with pride. “You can call me Brienne of Tarth.”

“Ah, but you forget something,” said Jaime, smirking. “You’re a Lannister now.”

“I’m no Lannister and this marriage is no marriage at all,” she said bitterly. “I’d rather die than take your name, my lord.”

“I’d prefer for you to die as well,” he shot back. “But for our unfortunate circumstances, I’d have cut you down if I had my way. Now, why don’t you be a good wife and give me that dagger?” He held out his hand, wondering how she had got hold of it in the first place.

Her eyes gleaming, she was about to make a move towards him, when he raised a hand in warning. “Think before you do anything. All you wield is a knife, my lady,” he said, itching all this while to remind her that he was the one in control. “Do not forget that in my possession are two swords.
Should you choose to strike, I’m going to slice you into a hundred pieces—”

Brienne pulled out the dagger from under her pillow and shoved it into his hands. “I hope this puts your fears to rest, Kingslayer,” she mocked. “Scared of a woman like me, I wonder if you’re even half the man you claim to be!” she exclaimed scathingly. “Someday, I’d very much like to know what you’re made of.”

This time she had gone a bit too far. “Oh, I’d love to show you how much of a man I am, my lady,” he snarled, pulling the knife out of her hand with more force than necessary. Breathing heavily, he fixed her with a pointed gaze, still reeling under the effect of her insult. “Since you asked so nicely, why don’t I indulge you?” he offered, purely with the intention to intimidate her. “As soon as you take off that stupid dress and show me what you have beneath it, I’ll see what I can do.”

Her upper lip twitched a bit, but other than that, she seemed unfazed, unaffected by his proposition. “Not if I can help it and only if I’m extremely unfortunate,” she replied, defiantly meeting his gaze. “Though I hope and pray that I don’t live to see that day.”

Her continued revulsion towards him left him bewildered, for never before had a woman been this unaffected by his beauty. So surprising was the wench’s unusual reaction to him that it left him wondering if the spark in him had indeed gone out. “Come on, my lady,” he pressed, going back to his usual teasing tone while trying his best not to sound disappointed. “You can be honest with me. Like countless other women I’ve met, I’m sure, you aren’t entirely immune to my charms.”

“Your so-called beauty might have Lady Bracken swooning in your arms,” she retorted, her pitch now so loud that he was worried they might be audible outside. “But thankfully, it is quite ineffective on me—”

She continued to insult him, but he paid no attention, his ears elsewhere. Footsteps outside the door…

“Shh,” he hissed, urging her to shut up. “There’s someone outside the door,” he whispered. “Perhaps Lady Bracken is out spying on us, to find out if we really are…fucking, he wanted to say, but stopped himself.

Her homely face turned red. “But you’ve already told her that we cannot—” she seemed to search for appropriate words “--that I’m bleeding.”

“That I have,” Jaime concurred, unable to fathom the intention behind the woman’s abrupt arrival. “The least we can do is to stop arguing,” he mouthed, hoping she’d calm her nerves and tone down her voice.

Lady Bracken’s presence had him in a fix. Common sense told him that no married couple madly in love with each other would be quietly asleep on their wedding night, that too when the night was young and there were hours to go before dawn. There would atleast be sweet-talk and kissing, if not the actual bedding itself.

“Tonight’s the best night of my life,” he said, instantly deciding what he had to do.

“*What*—” she began, but he stopped her with a finger on his lip, hinting to her to shut her mouth.

“I’m the luckiest man in all the seven kingdoms, my love—” he declared in his softest voice, though making sure he would audible outside “--to have become yours, to have made you mine.”

His wife merely stared at him, wide-eyed and speechless.
“I love you, my lady,” he continued in the same affectionate vein. “I made you a promise. I’d lay down my life for you, do anything to protect you, to keep you safe—” he paused, frustration filling him at her lack of response. “You’re supposed to say something as well,” he hissed under his breath, thinking if anyone could be as thick-skulled as her. “If you sit there, mute, we’d end up with our game over and our pants down in front of the Boltons, ready to be skinned alive.”

The wench blushed, her ugly face akin to an oversized tomato. “I…” she stammered. “My lord, I—” she stopped, unable to continue.

“Just tell me that you love me,” he prompted, as if instructing a squire about how to hold a sword for the first time. “Is it that difficult?”

“I love you, my lord,” she said between clenched teeth, her demeanor anything but romantic.

And then there was silence. Jaime listened again, to make sure all was quiet outside. Heaving a sigh of relief, he relaxed. “That, my dear wench, was the worst declaration of love I’ve ever heard,” he announced his verdict once they were alone again.

“I’m afraid that’s all you’re going to get from me, Kingslayer.”

“Why do you hate me so much?” he couldn’t help asking, slightly miffed. “Can’t you even pretend to have a few kind words for me?”

“I cannot lie, nor can I pretend,” she said severely. “You deserve no kindness.”

“What would you have done if we had to pretend to consummate the wedding?” he asked, observing her keenly.

She looked unsettled for a moment before composing herself. “The skilled liar that you are, I’m sure you’d have come up with some way to convince them.”

“It’s not that easy,” he mused, wondering how he would’ve tackled such a situation had they been thrown into it. “We might have had to offer proof of loss of your maidenhead… your blood on the sheets, maybe.” At that, he stopped to absorb her expression. Her face still red, he wasn’t sure if she was blushing because of this or if it was due to her usual anger towards him. “Of course, I could’ve told them I’d fucked you against the wall or perhaps in a bathtub. A bathtub… now that’s not a bad idea—”

“In your dreams, Kingslayer,” she interrupted him, the brusqueness of her tone shaking him out of thoughts of what it would feel like to take a woman in that manner. “In the eyes of the seven I might be your wife, but if you think I’d ever get naked with you in a bathtub—”

“What gives you the idea that it was you I was thinking about?” he asked, trying to dismiss visions of what the wench might look like, naked. “And what the hell makes you think I’d dream of you?” He forced himself to focus on Cersei, lest the wench might get other ideas about him.

“You wouldn’t,” she shot back. “But I wish I were a part of your worst nightmares.”

Appalled, he stared at her, marveling at the extent of blood-lust this woman suffered from. “I’d better try and get some sleep than waste any more of the night talking to you,” he said, deciding it was enough for the day as he returned to his designated place to sleep.

After that, no more was said. When peace prevailed at last, Jaime shut his eyes, compelling himself to sleep, hoping that his head wouldn’t be clouded by unnecessary thoughts of the wench.
Hours later, he got up to a knock on the door. Opening his eyes to broad daylight, he saw that the wench was already dressed. Today again, she wore a gown, but one that adequately covered her modesty, unlike the awfully low-cut abomination she had donned last night. Thank the gods, she’s wearing something better, he observed, watching her open the door. Left to me, I’d never let her wear that hideous piece of clothing again.

“M’lady.” It was one of their hostess’ handmaidens. “Lady Bracken is waiting for you for breakfast.” Having passed on the message, the maid left, leaving him alone with the wench.

“Good morning, wife,” he greeted her cheerfully once she had shut the door. All he had to do was mention the word wife … and the look that came upon her face, one which was a mix of rage, hatred and irritation was priceless, a joy to behold.

“Get up and get dressed if you want something to eat, Kingslayer,” she ordered him. “We can’t keep our hosts waiting forever.”

“Of course,” he replied with the best smile he could put on. “Your wish is my command, my sweetling.”

And this time, his pathetic attempt of fake-wooing his pretend-wife was rewarded by a bundle of clothes that hit him hard on the face. “I’d appreciate it if you stopped talking to me and went for a bath instead,” came her cold voice as she turned her back to him.

“As you say, my lady.” He got off the bed, smirking. “Though a bath might be all the more pleasurable if you’d join me—”

“Shut your mouth,” she shouted, facing him again, her cheeks red.

Bursting into peals of laughter, he settled down in the bath, savouring the satisfaction his new-found means of entertainment brought him.

Within the next few minutes, they dressed and met the family downstairs at the dining table. This meal was relatively less embarrassing compared to the last one, with the girls eating quietly for a change, neither attempting conversation nor demanding a story.

“Lady Bracken,” Brienne broke the unnaturally peaceful silence once they had finished eating, leaving Jaime apprehensive about what she was going to say. “My husband and I would like to take leave of you today,” she announced, throwing her husband a piercing look, as if daring him to counter her.

“Yes, my lady,” Jaime concurred hastily, not wanting to bear the brunt of her wrath by disagreeing. “Jeyne’s mother is expecting us.” He gave his hostess a sheepish smile. “My mother-in-law doesn’t know yet that we’re married, and she wouldn’t be too pleased if we were to deny her the pleasure of the news of our union any longer.”

“As you wish, my lord.” Lady Bracken smiled at him, the smile she reserved solely for him. “But you would stay for lunch, I hope?”

“It’d be our pleasure,” Jaime instantly accepted her offer.

“Lord Mormont,” cut in Kyra when they were just about to get up. “Before you leave, I’d request you to do something for us.”

“Yes, my lady?” he asked, thinking what the girl could be up to.
“My sister and I want to watch you duel your lady wife,” the girl said, leaving Jaime dumbfounded.

“But, my lady, we can’t do that,” he tried to politely decline.

“Please, Lord Mormont,” implored Alessa, looking at him with large, soulful eyes.

Jaime looked at the wench who wore the same helpless expression. Denying the girls would risk ruining the credibility of his story, while in obliging them lay a bigger risk for him. They possessed no tourney swords, and with a real one in hand, who knew what the wench might do to him if she were to acquire a position of advantage?

“I’d love to fulfill your wish, but we have no swords,” he said regretfully, using this as an excuse.

“I can get father’s,” offered Kyra, hurriedly getting up. “He owned a couple of sparring swords.” Without waiting for her mother’s consent, she dashed away, only to return in a while with her arms laden with what they needed.

“Here.” She handed Brienne and him one each. “We can go out to the courtyard,” she insisted, leading everyone outside.

“We might as well abide by the lady’s wishes, my love,” said Jaime with a sigh as they made their way out.

“I’d like nothing better than to knock you down, my lord,” Brienne replied, her voice so honey-sweet that no one but him could sense the underlying thirst for vengeance in it.

With their audience watching and cheering, they took their positions. No sooner did Jaime take a step towards her, than the wench lunged at him, swinging her sword with all her might, as if wishing nothing more than to draw blood. Though out of touch, he deftly parried her blow.

And so they began their dance once more, both of them equally skilled and neither of them ready to give up as they progressed. They were a perfect match, attacking and dodging as the need may be, each raining the other with masterful strokes, forgetting that this was just a friendly fight.

“You’re not going to get away this time, Kingslayer,” the wench muttered under her breath. “Last time was a lesson for me. I know your moves now, and I’m not going to make the same mistakes again,” she grunted, cornering him to one side.

“Never jump into conclusions before a fight is over, my dear,” he advised, trying hard to break free of the stream of blows she was showering him with.

“Your footwork is predictable,” she commented, keeping him on his toes every second, not allowing him to advance even once, leaving him with nothing but hopeless defensive moves. “So much that I can sense what’s coming.” Having almost recovered from her leg injury, she was proving to be more formidable than he had expected.

“You’re good,” he admired, even when he was on the verge of defeat. “Far better than the last time we faced each other.”

“I’m glad you’re impressed. Why don’t you watch me do even better, husband?” she said, flinging herself on him and pushing him bodily to the perimeter wall. Before he could realize what was happening, his sword was on the ground and her body was pressed against his. She held him to the wall, her sword tip to his neck. “Yield,” she whispered, her eyes blazing with the anticipation of revenge. Never before had he seen such anger in her, not even for him.
Unaffected, he faced those eyes, wanting to focus on the fire in them than get distracted by the swell of her breasts against his chest. A malicious plan took shape in his head and he looked deep into her eyes, a look so intense that she blinked, showing the first signs of distraction.

There was only one way to break her now.

“You have the prettiest eyes I’ve ever seen, Lady Brienne,” he murmured, tilting his face close to hers. “May I say that they’re more beautiful than the loveliest sapphires there could ever be, their depth so mesmerizing that your Sapphire Isles stand no chance in comparison.”

Jaime waited. For a moment, there was no reaction as the wench simply stared at him. Then she blinked again about three or four times, her cheeks acquiring a faint hue of pink as she dropped her gaze to his chest. Now was the moment. He could feel her sword-hand shiver slightly and her body slacken against him. Not one to waste this golden opportunity he had created for himself, he grabbed her by the waist. Taking her by surprise, he quickly disarmed her with his other hand.

Her eyes widening in shock, she soon understood what he had been playing at all along. But before she could react or do anything to reinstate her now-lost position of advantage, he gracefully spun her around and within seconds, had her pinned to the wall, holding the tip of the sword he had seized to her neck. “Yield, my lady,” he growled, smiling in satisfaction at the look of dismay on her face. He had left her with no means of retaliation, no sword to strike him with, while his body held her in place with no room for her to move her limbs.

Blue eyes pierced his green, burning him with anger that could seek no other outlet. Her breathing gradually returning to normal, she leaned backward, resting her head on the wall, silently accepting defeat and resigning to her fate.

The Bracken family was by their side, the girls applauding Jaime while their mother looked at him with eyes full of longing admiration.

“You beat her again!” little Alessa gleefully exclaimed. “No wonder she loves you, Lord Mormont, you’re strong enough for her.”

His eyes still on the wench, Jaime slowly released her. “That wasn’t a fair fight,” she shouted as soon as she had found her tongue. “He cheated.”

“What did I do, my love?” he asked, looking at her with eyes full of innocence.

“Yes,” Kyra came to his rescue. “What did he do?” She eyed them both curiously.

“He--” Brienne started, but shut her mouth immediately.

“Yes, my lady?” Jaime prompted, grinning mischievously at her, daring her to tell their audience about how he had defeated her.

She finally broke the prolonged spell of his gaze. “Nothing,” she snapped, fleeing from the place.

“I should go and check on her,” Jaime told Lady Bracken. “She’s always like this when she loses a fight.” He pretended to be embarrassed before adding, “All she needs is a little love from me.”

Excusing himself, he went after her, leaving the girls giggling behind him. Pushing the door open, he tentatively entered their chambers, prepared for an attack or a retaliation. But none came, and he found the wench pacing the room like a caged lioness.

“What the hell gave you the right to touch me?” she yelled, her eyes blazing. “When I made myself
absolutely clear last night that--"

“It was a fight, woman,” he justified himself, irked by her accusation. “These things happen in a fight. Has no man ever touched you in a duel before?”

“That was no fight!” she exclaimed. “You can never beat me in a fair fight. You won by luck the first time, while today you employed the means of deceit to have your way. Shame on you to call yourself a knight, ser, for such cheap behaviour doesn’t become your title--”

“Enough,” he interrupted, anger rising in his chest. “We’re working together towards a common end, and I am not here to be insulted by you. I don’t care what you think about me and I harbour no desire to touch you nor shower false praises on you,” he made himself clear again. “I did that solely with the intention to put you down, unless--” he peered at her closely, keen to gauge what was on her mind “--you really thought I was praising your eyes. Did you?” he asked, his rage now replaced by curiosity.

“I’d be a fool if I thought you capable of such pleasantries, Kingslayer. I know you enough to expect nothing but taunts and mockery from your bitter tongue.”

“You may say what you like now, but for a moment there you did seem to believe I was speaking the truth,” he said, remembering the blush on her cheeks and her flustered expression. “So you aren’t really immune to my charms, my lady,” he concluded, breaking into a smug smile.

“I’m no Lady Bracken,” she snapped, as if being attracted to him was a crime. “I didn’t throw myself into your arms, did I? I was merely careless enough to be distracted by your empty words, losing a stupid fight after almost winning it.”

“Ah, but I did manage to distract you, wench,” he boasted, proud of his achievement. “You thought I was about to kiss you,” he breathed, taking a step closer to her. “Didn’t you?”

“You’re lucky such a thing didn’t cross my mind,” she said acidly. “Had it been so, I’d have kicked you in the balls in self-defence.”

“That, my lady, is something you’re absolutely capable of,” he agreed, wincing at the thought of a kick in his balls.

“You always have and will continue to fill me with revulsion, Kingslayer,” she declared, leaving him wondering if she was always like this. With that, she diverted her attention to packing her clothes, indicating the end of the argument.

Is it just me, or is she always this stone-hearted? Much to his chagrin, he felt a tinge of disappointment at her resentment towards him.

The rest of the morning went by with both of them keeping to themselves. To Jaime’s relief, lunch was peaceful, and after that the two of them headed to the village market to pick up some supplies for their onward journey. Resorting to an unspoken agreement of mutual silence, they trudged along the narrow streets.

“Well, well, well,” came a familiar voice from behind them. “If it’s not the fancy lord and his low-born wife.”

Jaime spun around to find himself in the company of the two Bolton men who had accosted them on their first night here. “What can I do for you, my friends?” he inquired, sounding as pleasant as he could.
“How’s married life?” the big bearded one asked, throwing Brienne a lecherous look. “Fucked your woman, have you?”

It took Jaime all the will power he could muster to prevent himself from breaking the man’s teeth. “Good,” he managed an amiable answer. “Now if you’d excuse us, my lady wife and I have to get on—”

“What does it feel like, fuckin’ a low-born woman?” The other man crossed their path when Jaime took a step forward.

Clenching his fist in rage, Jaime waited for a few seconds to calm himself down. “Come on, my lady,” he spoke to Brienne, wanting no trouble. “Let’s leave.” Taking her hand, he was about to lead her out of these men’s way when they were interrupted again.

“Lady?” the big one repeated. “Last I heard, wench was what you called her, didn’t you?”

Jaime couldn’t contain himself anymore. “She’s now a lady,” he corrected the man. “Call her by her name.”

“If you insist, m’lord.” He gave Jaime a mock-bow. “So, what was she before you wed her, a lowly tavern wench? We could’ve had a taste of her before you decided to keep her to yourself—”

Before he could realize what he was doing, Jaime pounced on him, smashing his nose with a well aimed punch. The man was stunned for a second, but seeing the blood trickling down his face, he regained his senses and lunged towards Jaime.

“That’s enough,” Brienne intervened, trying to pull them apart, but with no success. Soon the other man joined him in the attack and before Jaime could do anything about it, the three of them were on the ground, a confused, tangled mess of limbs.

“Let go of my husband,” he heard the wench shout as she attacked his assailants.

Just as he was about to break free of them and get to his feet with her help, he felt a sharp blow to his head. As he crashed to the ground, Brienne’s worried eyes were the last thing he saw before the world around him faded into nothing.

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“How are you?”

When Jaime opened his eyes, he was lying in his bed, the wench’s voice sounding distant and muffled inside his head.

“In pain,” he groaned. “Fine, otherwise.”

Bending down, she began massaging his head. Her hand is softer than I expected, he noted, despite the muddled state of his mind. Closing his eyes, he allowed himself to be taken care of by her, relaxing as her soothing hand began to alleviate his pain.

“How long have you been attending to me?” he asked after a while, opening his eyes again.

“You’ve been out a few hours,” she said, not answering his question directly. “That was stupid of you, Kingslayer. Taking on those two men single-handed was no joke,” she scolded.

“Your influence, I gather,” he replied. “Stupidity is a virtue I’m beginning to acquire in your
Why did you do it?” she asked, ignoring his taunt for a change. “Why did you defend me when those men insulted me?”

“No husband would stand by and watch his wife being insulted,” he said, though not entirely sure if that was the reason behind his doing. “I had to play the ruse properly.” He paused to rest for a second. “Why did you take care of me, my lady?” The question was burning in his mind ever since he opened his eyes. He hadn’t expected the wench to bother about him, let alone tend to his injuries.

“No wife would sit and watch her husband suffer in pain,” came her immediate reply as she continued pressing his forehead. “I had to play the game properly.” When he had no fitting retort to that, she went on. “Lady Bracken wanted to tend to you personally. You should thank me for saving you from her unwanted attentions.”

“Oh, I don’t mind being the object of her undivided attention,” he teased, trying to catch her eye. “Unless you’re jealous, my lady, and wanted me to yourself—”

“Wouldn’t it have looked odd if I had let her do it?”

“Maybe,” said Jaime with a shrug. “But I’d have preferred her anytime over you, if not anything else, she’s better to look at than you—”

“Would you like me to break your head again so that she can take care of you?” Her voice was once again softly venomous.

Despite his headache, Jaime couldn’t help smiling. “Can’t you ever take a joke, wench?” When she just glared at him, he assumed his serious expression again. “Now that you’ve done me some good, what do you expect in return?” he asked, wanting to know the true reason for her act of kindness. “If you think I’m going to start trusting you after this, you’re mistaken—”

“No!” She abruptly took her hand off his head. “I’d never make such a mistake. I remember I’m your captive, Kingslayer, and that’s what I’ll be for the rest of our fateful journey. I didn’t do this because I expected you to trust me. I expect nothing of that sort from you.”

“Then what—” he began.

“Hand over the Stark girls to me and let me go, that’s all I want from you,” she said, her tone betraying her agitation. “Keep your end of the deal and I swear I’ll never look at your face again in my life.”

“Is your vow the only thing that matters to you, wench?”

Her eyes shone with emotion. “I live for my vow, and I’m prepared to die for it,” she answered him, her voice choked. “Some good deeds expect nothing in return, but you wouldn’t know of such things, would you? Try making a selfless promise for a change. Try keeping your word some day instead of criticizing my ideals, Kingslayer. Perhaps that’s when you’ll realize that being honourable isn’t all that bad.”

Getting up from the bed, she left the room, slamming the door behind her. Jaime stared at the door long after she was gone, her words leaving him lost in his thoughts.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The journey continues. Conversations and much more happen...

“How can’t we buy another horse?” Brienne complained as they walked to the stables.

“I’m afraid that’s a luxury we can’t afford, my lady,” said her husband.

She groaned, dreading the prospect of the journey ahead. Given the awkward turn of events over the last couple of days, prolonged physical proximity to the Kingslayer was something she would’ve gladly wished to avoid, with yesterday’s incident leaving her particularly shaken. Still unable to fathom what had come over her when she had jumped in to protect him, she decided to put her mind at ease by convincing herself that she had only acted for the wellbeing of the girls. Their lives for his was always her objective, which meant his life was priceless. What was more astonishing, however, was his adverse reaction to those men’s bawdy comments. While, no doubt, he had done it to keep up their bluff, it still felt strange, for never in her wildest dreams had she imagined the Kingslayer to jump to her defence, a fake show of anger, though, it may have been.

Jaime took in her grumpy face. “We’re a bit short on gold,” he explained in an attempt to reason with her, surprised that she would be irresponsible enough to make such a demand. “We’re still a few days from King’s Landing. We can’t afford to squander what’s left on things we can do without.”

“I never imagined a Lannister to be this prudent about money,” she thought aloud. “A horse is something I can definitely do with,” she muttered, shuddering at the ominous possibility of another long leg of travel stuck to him.

“Why, though?” he asked, with a twinkle in his eye. “You ought to be happy to be travelling by my side, wench, for a wife’s place is with her husband.” Brienne rolled her eyes. Familiar though it was by now, no matter how hard she tried, she found it difficult to ignore his snark. When she resisted a reply, he provoked her further as was their usual norm. “Just as you never, for a minute, left my bedside when I was hurt yesterday, my lady.”

“I told you why I did that,” she tried to justify, a warm flush creeping up her neck at the memory. Desperate to mask her embarrassment, she forced a cold tone. “Now I realize it was a mistake. I should’ve left you to die, or better still, I should’ve let Lady Bracken look after you.”

“There’s nothing more I’d have liked than to be taken care of by a proper lady,” he quipped, smirking.

For a while, neither of them spoke a word, staring at the ground as they headed towards their destination. “Still upset with me, my lady?” he asked, breaking the silence. “I agree, my remark last night was unworthy,” he said softly, making her stare at him in astonishment. “I should’ve known you’d want nothing for yourself in return for your unexpected act of kindness towards me. You’re far too selfless for that.”

So shocked she was with the admittance of his mistake that she accidentally tripped over a stone without noticing it. “Was that an apology, Kingslayer?” she asked in disbelief, balancing herself
in time to avoid a fall. “Or was it, yet again, one of your jaded attempts at mockery?” She wanted to be doubly sure of his intention.

“Neither,” came his spontaneous reply. “Just a conclusion that you kept me safe only to safeguard your vow, that you’d give your life to keep your promise to the people you love.”

Confused about the hidden implication of his statement, she decided not to be stamped upon by him. “I’d take that as a compliment, for keeping a vow is something a man like you can never accomplish.”

“An insult to one is a compliment to another, wench,” was his caustic reply in the usual stinging tone he adopted with her. “Think what you like, but there’s nothing to be gained by putting others before you. It’s foolish, and downright stupid in the name of honour.”

“And there’s nothing to lose by putting others’ welfare before yours at times,” she countered. “But how would you know? A man who chose to put himself before the one he had sworn to protect doesn’t deserve to make another vow. Who would trust him even if he did make a promise again?”

“Maybe one day you’ll find out who’s trustworthy and who’s not, wench.” An odd expression clouded his handsome face. “Until then, I’d advise you to reserve your judgement. It’s better than living with borrowed opinions about people you don’t personally know.”

Before she could respond with a biting remark to match his, he strode ahead of her, indicating the end of the conversation. Tired of going back and forth with such arguments, Brienne was only too happy to oblige his momentary indifference. With her limp still troubling her, it took her some time to catch up with him. When she reached, he had already prepared the saddle and was standing by the beast, waiting for her to mount first.

“Aren’t you going to bind me in chains?” she asked him, her eyes dropping to his empty hands. She didn’t know whether to be surprised or suspicious that their usual chore of him tying her up wasn’t coming.

He shook his head without looking at her, focussing his attention on straightening the saddle. “I’ve decided against it. You don’t need them anymore.”

Bewildered, Brienne was about to voice her appreciation for his trust in her, but what came out instead was something entirely contrasting. “To what do I owe this change of heart, Kingslayer? Have you grown to trust me after all that happened yesterday?” Her tone dripped with the sarcasm she had subconsciously infused it with.

He moved towards her so suddenly that she was taken aback. His face was too close to hers for comfort, so much that she was worried that he might… But she didn’t flinch, nor did she recoil, determined not to be intimidated. “It is naive of you to have mistaken my actions for a show of trust, wench.” He shot her an angry glare. “I just know you wouldn’t do anything to jeopardise the girls’ safety. You’re stupid enough die for them, and for that alone, you will come quietly with me.” He exhaled deeply. “I don’t trust you. I trust your conviction in keeping your promise to them.”

Deciding to put a stop to their never-ending disagreements, they resumed their journey. “We’re going to keep to the woods,” Jaime informed her once they had taken their positions. “Travelling the Kingsroad is risky. We’ll be easily spotted. I don’t trust Lady Bracken and her Bolton thugs.”

“They could have someone following us,” Brienne voiced her concern. “We told them we’re taking the Kingsroad to Harrenhal, so shouldn’t we be--”
“That’s what I’m going to do,” he said, reading her thoughts correctly. “We’ll take the road to begin with and travel a few miles on the route to Harrenhal to mislead any stalkers. We can stop for the night on the way and then quietly take a detour towards the forests tomorrow morning,” he revealed his plan. “Tomorrow, come dawn, we’ll be long gone before they realize.”

“That should put them off,” Brienne agreed, grudgingly appreciating him for coming up with an idea such as this.

The horse took off without warning, pushing Jaime into her, and her heart leapt to her throat when her body became aware of his touch. “Do my ears deceive me, my lady?” His lips were so close to her ear that she could feel his beard tickle her neck, sending the now-familiar unpleasantly pleasant sensation surging through her once more. “Did you just happen to agree with me?”

Distracted by his chest pressing against her back and his breath on her neck, Brienne cursed herself for relenting to travel in the stupid dress that left her neck exposed. If you don a man’s breeches, it’ll only raise suspicions, for that’s no way a newly wed bride dresses, Jaime had told her in an attempt to convince her into it for the second, and if she could help it, the last time. “It would do us good if you rode faster than wasting your efforts teasing me,” she told him off in an attempt to suppress the frustration growing inside her.

The horse lurched and she could feel his throat upon her neck this time, his voice a low rumble when he spoke. “Who apart from your husband could dare take the liberty to tease you, my lady?”

“My husband might have that right… should I ever decide to take a real husband--” she paused, wondering how to make herself clear “--and not the man who had to resort to fake wedding vows to keep up a pack of lies.”

“That was no fake marriage, wench,” he sounded offended. “We’re one in the eyes of the gods, and that’s all that matters to the eyes of men.”

“That’s all that matters to the eyes of men,” she said vehemently. “I’m being forced to grin and bear with you, Kingslayer, for no fault of mine.”

“Grin? I’d love to see you smile someday, woman,” he teased. “A real, nice smile for your loving husband, that is, not the odd sarcastic smirk you enjoy gracing me with. I don’t suppose you’re capable of that, are you?”

This went on for some more time until they both fell silent, tired of talking. They rode on without further ado, the rest of the day turning out to be uneventful. While uneventful didn’t include the frequent japes and taunts she was now accustomed to being subjected to, atleast they didn’t have men trying to kill or capture them. With the sky darkening, they decided to settle down for the night. Finding a suitable spot, they set up camp.

“What did you see in Renly?” he asked suddenly when they sat by the fire, eating.

Brienne’s heart burst with pride on being reminded of her king. “He was a brave, honest and just ruler,” she praised him. “He was the one true king, the protector of the realms.”

“Ah, but he’d have had to survive for that. Sadly, he managed to get himself killed too soon.” His eyes glowed in the light of the fire when he leaned towards her. “They say it was a shadow that killed him. A shit load of nonsense if you’d ask me. An easy way to cover up a cowardly end--”

“Shut your mouth,” she shouted, unwilling to tolerate even the slightest criticism about the man she loved and worshipped.
Jaime gave her a long, hard look. “Can’t come face to face with reality, wench?”

“That was exactly how it happened. I saw it, I was there,” she said defensively. “Renly was not a coward. He wasn’t the one to have shoved a sword into an unarmed man’s back.”

He seemed to take no offense to that, instead, what he said next caught her unawares. “You’re in love with him,” he observed, his emerald eyes shining even brighter. “You’d never admit it, but--”

“Yes, I am,” she confessed, wondering why she was revealing her deepest secrets to the man she loved to despise.

He grinned. “I was right the first time.” There was a hint of triumph in his voice. “Your eyes, wench--” he stopped talking, his forehead creasing into a frown as he continued staring at her.

“What about them?” she demanded, uncomfortable with his piercing stare. If there was one thing she wouldn’t forget, it was the time he’d told her that she had pretty eyes. No doubt, it had been in jest, for that was all he was capable of, but it had felt so genuine. Had she not known his intentions, she would’ve mistaken it for a sincere compliment, for there was so much depth in his voice and the way he had looked at her when he spoke those words, lies though they may have been.

He didn’t speak, gazing into her eyes for another long moment. “They always lay bare your feelings,” he told her at last. “One look at them tells me all about everything that’s in your mind, uncovering the secrets locked away in the deepest confines of your heart.”

She looked away, heat flooding her cheeks at the thought of the Kingslayer discovering her innermost thoughts and feelings. “You blush,” he noted, leaving her all the more ill at ease. “Lost in thoughts of your pretty king?”

“That’s enough talk for today,” she said gruffly, about to get to her feet. “Time to sleep--“

“Oh, don’t leave,” he implored. “The night’s still young and neither of us are sleepy. Let’s talk about your dear Renly for a change.”

“There’s nothing to talk about him!”

His next question left her lost for an answer. “Would you have agreed if he had asked you to marry him?”

After careful thinking, she decided to give him an honest answer. “Yes.”

“Instead, you’re stuck here with an oathbreaker like me for a husband.”

“Not for long if I can help it.” She wanted to infuse optimism in her voice, but all she felt deep down was doubt and a lack of self-confidence.

“What makes you think Renly would’ve made a better husband than me?” It sounded more like an invitation to her opinion than his usual show of arrogance. “You fantasized about marrying him, didn’t you?” he asked, without waiting for an answer.

“None of your concern,” she snapped, desperate to evade him. Renly was not a subject she wished to discuss with a man who held no regard for him.

“He would’ve been no good,” he went on, ignoring her dismissal. “He was so busy chasing Loras Tyrell that he ignored his lovely queen. You’re better off with me than a man like him.”
“I’m going to sleep,” was all she said in reply to that. Picking her corner of the tent as usual, she lay down, facing away from him. “You can keep talking at the risk of being ignored, Kingslayer.”
Determined to sleep tonight after many nights of disturbed sleep, all Brienne could do was toss and turn, the dampness in the air and cold wind that was blowing leaving her slightly shivering. It had been windy all evening, indicating that a spell of rain was coming.

“There’s a blanket here if you want,” he offered, trying to tempt her.

“I’ll take another one.” She sat up, her discomfort rising by the minute, adding to it the envy on seeing him comfortably snuggled inside the safe confines of a warm blanket.

“I’m afraid, we just have one, my lady,” he told her without regret nor guilt that he had upon him the only means of shelter from the cold.

“Of course—” she grumbled “—your dear Lady Bracken thought only of you, conveniently forgetting that your wife was travelling with you as well.”

“Do I sense a hint of jealousy again, my sweetling?” he teased. “Don’t worry, I’m all yours tonight,” he whispered, his voice captivatingly seductive. “We could share the blanket and so much more. I could provide you with some much needed warmth—”

“You do know I’m quite capable of breaking teeth, don’t you?” Unsettled though she was by the way he looked at her, she managed to sound unperturbed, adopting a silky smooth tone. “Try getting close to me and you’ll discover other skills I possess as well,” she threatened, though not that confident from inside.

“I’d love to know more about you,” he growled, making her skin erupt into goosebumps. “Come to me, my lady. Let’s spend the night exploring each other’s skills—”

“Enough of it,” she cut him, wanting to put an end to his nonsense. “You can have your bloody blanket. Unlike you, I’m not delicate, I can survive a bit of cold.”

“As you wish.” He shrugged, pulling the blanket to his chin. “We’ll meet at dawn if you don’t die of cold.”

Lying down again, Brienne made an attempt to shut her eyes, but the wind howled louder, making her curl up into a ball to counter the chill that was slowly beginning to numb her limbs. She tossed and turned, trying to get some relief from the painful cramps in her legs. Occasionally, she stole a glance at him, wondering how a knight like him could be this unchivalrous. But then, this was the Kingslayer. Unlike other knights, his rules were different, and so were his principles. She mulled over the way he spoke to her at times, trying to gauge the hidden meaning in his statements, worried if they were any indication of his true intent. His open threat to bed her, and worse still, share a bath with her on their so-called wedding night had left her shaken for a while, as had his offer a while ago to warm her bed.

*He merely hates me,* she consoled herself. *He’s just trying to intimidate me this way because I’m a woman...* Why else would a man who’s been faithful to just one woman all his life make advances to an ugly wench like her? It wasn’t lust, it was spite, and as long as that was what it was, she could be at peace.

Distressed by her thoughts and her aching limbs, she was about to get up, losing all hopes of sleep, when she felt a sudden layer of warmth around her.

“What—” she sat up with a start, only to spot him retreating to his corner. He had decided to sacrifice
the only available blanket for her. So he did have a bit of chivalry in him.

“Sleep,” he said brusquely. “I can’t have you falling ill.”

She thought for a moment. Then she got up, albeit reluctantly, taking the blanket with her as she went over to his side.

“Move,” she ordered, gesturing to him to make place for her.

He gave her a little wink. “So you did succumb to my charms after all, my lady,” he said, a sly smirk dancing on his lips.

“I can’t have you falling ill either,” was all she said before lying down and wrapping the blanket around both of them.

They lay still, with Brienne trying her best to avoid even the slightest contact with him. But with the width of the blanket being insufficient for two, that wasn’t entirely possible. They ended up bumping into each other every time one of them turned, an occasional brush of an arm here or a knee there, adding to her woes.

“Stop tossing around restlessly, wench,” he complained. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“Then what bothers you, my lady?” He turned to face her, his eyes on hers. “Imagine I’m Renly for tonight.”

All she could do in response was glare at him.

Not one to be deterred by the power of her gaze, he went on shamelessly. “What’s so special about him that I lack?”

“Stop getting ideas, Kingslayer,” she warned again, her nagging fear returning.

“A married man has every right to cuddle his wife—” he announced, shifting slightly closer “—not sleep at an arm’s distance from her.”

“Only his corpse would remain if he tried anything like that,” she snapped back, wishing she had a sword to drive into him, just to keep him quiet. “Take care not to touch me, if you do—”

“—you’ll break my teeth,” he repeated her threat. “I know, wench, don’t worry, I won’t come any closer.”

When she glared at him, still doubtful, he went on, his face serious. “If I wanted to fuck you, I would’ve done it long back. Let me make it clear, my lady, that I bear no desire for you. Even if I were to see you naked down to your cunt, my cock would droop as low as it could, for a woman like you has nothing to excite me,” he said, this time neither joking nor teasing her. “I’ve only been saying all this to provoke you into anger.”

Whether to take his words as an insult or as a reassurance that he had no interest in her, Brienne didn’t know, but she didn’t care either. All that was important to her was his determination not to touch her. With this feeling of peace, she shut her eyes.

Hours later, when she woke to the sound of thunder, it wasn’t dawn yet. With the fire long extinguished by the raging winds, their only source of light was the intermittent bolts of lightning
from time to time. Warm and comfortable under the blanket, she had no desire to leave her bed.

It was only after a while that she realized to her horror that the source of her warmth wasn’t entirely the blanket, but Jaime Lannister’s body as well. She was on her side and he had indeed snuggled up to her with his arm around her waist and his chest pressing against her back. To make things worse, he nuzzled her neck in his sleep, the contact with his beard sending out the same old unwelcome sensations to the pit of her stomach. He stirred in his sleep, throwing his leg over hers and pulling her closer, his hand slowly creeping up her waist, up her ribs, inching towards her breasts--

“Get up, Kingslayer,” she barked in panic when his fingers were just shy of her breast. For a second, she couldn’t breathe, her first instinct being to jerk his hand away. Thankfully, she didn’t have to do that, for he was up with a start.

“What a lovely way to wake your husband, wench!” he breathed into her neck. Noting the awkward position they were in, he immediately relinquished his hold on her. “This--” he stammered “--wasn’t intentional.”

“I know,” she muttered, unable to say anything further. Ashamed of what had transpired between them, she couldn't face him as they went about preparing to leave.

They worked in silence, dismantling the tent as the rain poured down on them, drenching them to the bone. They would’ve waited the rain out, but with the risk of being followed looming large over them, they had no choice but to continue. With the first rays of the sun just beginning to show up, tearing through the gloomy cloud cover, they were about to board their mount when they heard a sound behind them.

Men. Not one, or two, or three, but four. Just as they had feared, they were ambushed. Starks, she noticed, taking one look at the sigil on their cloaks.

Jaime was quick to act. “Here,” he shouted, throwing one of the swords to her.

And then the struggle for survival began. The men, obviously out to return Jaime to the king, came after her. No wonder that, with her out of the way, a lone, tired knight would be an easy capture. Three, out of the four had surrounded her, with only one man engaging Jaime, who wasted no time in driving the blade through his heart.

For Brienne, on the other hand, it was no easy task taking three at a time. She dodged one, and attacked the other two, but with her injury still slowing her down, she wasn’t her best and three was one too many for her to handle. She managed to injure one of them, knocking him down for the time being, but the other two continued to keep her busy. One of them came charging at her, his blade aimed straight for her heart. But her reflexes prevailed and she slipped away, the sword piercing the horse instead. With a loud neigh, the beast collapsed to the ground in a heap.

“I'll take this one,” Jaime shouted, grabbing the one who had attacked her. “You take care of the other.”

Many minutes of struggle later, they prevailed, their clothes ripped in places, wet, and covered in mud. Glad to be alive, they stood over their assailants’ corpses, panting in relief.

“We'll have to walk, I suppose,” observed Jaime, clutching his chest for breath as he drew her attention to their poor, dead horse.

Wiping the sword clean on one of the corpses, she handed it back to him. “Keep it,” he said, leaving her astonished. “It’s yours.”
They trudged along, resuming their journey on foot. Every few seconds, Brienne stole a glance at him in an attempt to guess what was on his mind. She had come a long way from being dragged around in chains to being so generously handed a sword. A rare nice gesture, but what she couldn’t fathom, was his uncharacteristic change of heart. First his refusal to cuff her, and now the sword—neither of these decisions were normal for a man like him. Of course he was sure she wouldn’t get away, but actions like these, at times, left her wondering if the Kingslayer was indeed as heartless as she thought him to be.

“Thinking about Renly?”

“What?” She was lost for a moment. “No!”

“I’m sure you dreamed about him last night.” Jaime grinned at her. “You really did think of me as Renly, my lady,” he revealed, looking amused.

A wave of panic struck her. “How do you know what I dreamed of?”

He chuckled. “You talk in your sleep, wench.”

“What did I say?” she asked, remembering no such dream, wondering if she had said or done anything inappropriate.

“Oh, a few things—” he answered her vaguely “—and a few nothings, sweet talk mostly, nothing a man like me could ever be the recipient of, though being your husband, I am entitled to—”

“I did no such thing,” she denied, doubting herself as she spoke. Did she really blabber in her sleep?

“Why else did you snuggle against me, my dear? If I remember, I tried to keep away fearing my teeth, but you pulled me closer.”

“My apologies if I did that,” she said in a hollow tone, her face burning with shame.

“Oh, don’t apologize,” he said mischievously. “I took no offence to it.” When she continued to look miserable, he burst out laughing. “Don’t worry, my lady, you said nothing last night. Our awkward sleeping position was just an innocent mistake, nothing else.”

Relief washing over her, she felt like driving the blade into his chest.

“I’m quite intrigued by the people you’ve sworn your loyalty to,” he changed the subject. “First Renly, then Catelyn Stark… the Starks aren’t as noble as they seem to be, wench. Ned Stark for instance—”

“You will not speak of Lord Stark like this,” she cut him angrily. “A man of your character has no right to criticise the most honourable man to have lived in Westeros in the recent times.”

The moment she defended Lord Stark, his pleasant expression was gone, replaced by an angry frown. “I will, until the day I die,” he shot back, enraged.

“Lord Stark is the most noble—”

“Oh, you know nothing about honourable Ned Stark, do you?” He laughed mirthlessly. “I can tell you things about him that would make you roll your eyes in disbelief. That, apart from the well known fact that he fathered some whore’s bastard.”

“You will not—” she began, but Jaime was unstoppable.
“And Renly? The so-called just ruler that you speak of whored around with his own brother-in-law-”

Now she was livid. “Isn’t that a bit too much coming from a man who fornicates with his sister?” she lashed out, having no control over the words that left her lips.

“I fuck my sister and I don’t deny it because I love her,” he yelled. “But she’s the only woman I’ve ever fucked. Unlike your precious Renly, I have no wife I’ve been unfaithful to.”

“You don’t have to drag Renly into every argument!”

“I can, and I will,” he growled, his eyes flashing fire. “Anything that looked like a man and had a cock was good enough for your pretty boy. Had you possessed a cock, wench, he’d have fucked you as well and once bored of you, he’d have abandoned you for some other cock that caught his fancy—”

This was beyond Brienne’s tolerance limit. In a fit of rage, she pulled out her sword and charged at him like a woman insane. In her impulsive state, she had forgotten that the ground was wet and muddy, with little puddles all over. She slipped, but retained her balance, but to do so, she ended up taking her eyes off him for a second. That momentary distraction was good enough for Jaime who didn’t even bother to draw his blade. All he did was take advantage of her weak leg. With a well aimed kick to her still sore thigh, he sent her crashing to the ground.

I’m not letting you win that easily , she resolved to herself as her blade slipped from her hand. Grabbing a fistful of his shirt, she dragged him down with her as she fell.

She lay sprawled in the dirt, her clothes askew, with him on top of her. “What was that for, wench?” he roared. With his hair disheveled and his eyes burning bright, he looked every bit the fierce lion he was by name. He had her wrists pinned above her head, binding them in an iron grip. “Why did you charge at me?”

Once her blinding anger had passed, she became painfully conscious of his body on hers, their wet clothes only adding to her misery.

“You insulted Renly,” she hissed. “You asked for it.”

He pushed hard against her breasts, and she could feel her nipples stiffen under his firm chest. “Is that cunt worth so much rage? Why do you even bother protecting twats like him?”

“You aren’t worthy enough to judge him,” she spat, squirming under him in an attempt to break free. “You’re worth nothing. Now get off me.”

His gaze dropped to her chest, her torn dress along with the low-cut neck leaving her worried once more for her honour. Their little sparring match and the brawl in the market had left her injured leg weak and painful. In a fit of rage if he chose to claim his rights as her husband, she wasn’t entirely sure if she could defend herself, given her vulnerable state.

“For a while, I believed in you, wench,” he whispered, breathing down her chest, his warm breath setting her body on fire despite her cold, wet gown. “Never knew you’d try to betray me this early.”

“I did not betray you,” she denied his accusation. “I told you, my reaction was impulsive. You can have your bloody sword back if you want. But you will not insult Renly as long as you’re with me.”

“Looks like I made a mistake handing you that sword. If you try to attack me one more time…” He stopped talking and tilted his head towards her, his eyes drilling holes into hers and his lips just shy
Brienne gulped, wondering if this was a warning for her to abide by his rules if she wanted to preserve her honour. The Kingslayer wouldn’t lay a finger on her as he had promised her, but that was only when he was in his right frame of mind. He had always been rash and impulsive, and the way he lashed out at her now, driven insane by his rage, she couldn’t predict how he might react in anger. Worse than her apprehension was the adverse effect his touch had on her. Her heart thumped at a ridiculous pace, though she was unsure if it was due to her anger or his hard, wet chest pressing against her breasts.

“Let me go,” she repeated, making up her mind to kick him in the balls if he didn’t release her in the next two seconds. But her knees failed to obey her, her clouded thinking thanks to his warm damp breath on her face more a reason for this than the fact that he had her legs forced down with his.

“Promise me you won’t attack me,” he insisted, his lips intimidatingly close to hers. His grip on her wrists tightened and it was only now that she realized the full strength of his well-defined arms. What she felt was not discomfort or pain, but the same pleasant ache inside her that she so wished to avoid since she had first experienced it. “Give me a reason to trust you again.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that I had no intention of attacking you? If I wanted to kill you, I could’ve left you at the mercy of those thugs that got you at the market.” She paused to breathe. “Not everyone is like you, Kingslayer. I abide by my principles.”

He said nothing after that, but he didn’t get off her either. They lay there, his hands still clamped on her wrists, their bodies wet and hot despite the cool weather, their chests heaving as one and their breathing laboured and heavy. They glared at one another, each daring the other to take one misstep, to make one mistake...
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

As Jaime struggles against his budding attraction to the wench, all is not well for the couple.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The wench had shut her mouth, but Jaime lay where he was, his limbs refusing to function and his brain completely frozen, the silence almost killing him.

“Are you going to cut me down, Kingslayer, or are you under the false notion that I’d comply with your advances?” she spoke again when his lips hovered dangerously over hers. “To be honest, I’d rather welcome death at your hands than live with the foul memory of your touch.”

Painfully aware that they were but an inch shy of a kiss, Jaime raised his head slightly, widening the gap between them. “You’re too naive and foolish if you think I desire you,” he said, offended that she thought so badly of him. Their closeness should’ve increased his revulsion for her, instead, much to his annoyance, he was unable to tear his eyes off her lips. “Given a chance, though, I’d say, the prospect of driving a sword through your heart is quite tempting.” He resorted to negativity again, expecting it to drive away the wicked thoughts that were slowly corrupting his mind. He met her eyes, trying to gauge what was on her mind, and in place of disgust or abhorrence at the prospect of being kissed by him, he saw a stubborn defiance in them, the determination to face him fearlessly no matter what he threw at her.

Time crawled, the tension in the air now thick enough to be cut with a knife as their eyes battled each other, unblinking and relentless. While Jaime realized that they were both equally at fault for this unnecessary altercation, neither of them was ready to give in and accept their mistake. Her repeated reference to his tainted character had left him affronted, and in spite of using his strength and the power of his sex to intimidate her, he found himself at a loss for further words, her proximity, more than the fact that she had pulled her sword on him acutely hindering his ability to think.

“What the hell are you still staring at, then?” She twitched and squirmed under him, frustrating him with her non-stop movement. “If you want to kill me, then do it and get it over with right now, else get off me!”

“Oh, give me a reason, wench, and I’ll do it.” He aimed to be a step ahead of her, nothing giving him more pleasure than to set her ablaze with anger and watch her redden and pounce on him in rage.

“Killing an unarmed, injured woman without reason shouldn’t be a problem for you, so what’s stopping you?” she egged him on, her tone cold, her resolve steely and her demeanour anything but submissive; just as he had expected of her. Oddly, her willingness to face the worst of him impressed him against his will.

He gave her question a serious thought. A reluctant belief in your honour, he answered to himself, unnerved with the way his thoughts about her were beginning to take shape. It’s your bloody fault, wench, you’ve got my brain all muddled and clogged and that’s what’s holding me back, though,
fuck only knows why! He didn’t answer her, refusing to entertain her provocation towards another argument.

His attention was drawn to the blue eyes that pierced him, eyes that sparkled brighter than they usually did, with the raindrops that settled on her lashes greatly enhancing their charm. When she blinked, a couple of the tiny droplets entered her eyes, the little beads of water adding to their shine and beauty. Captivating and enchanting, indeed, they were, for Jaime just couldn’t look away. Livid, though he was at first when she had attacked him, once his rage had dissolved, other pressing problems were beginning to trouble him. This was perhaps the strangest and the most delicate predicament he had ever got himself into. On one hand was his insurmountable desire to overpower her and prove his superiority, while on the other, was his body’s reaction to her, something that was slowly causing him unanticipated trouble.

The downpour had ceased, now reduced to a mild drizzle, but their clothes were still soaking wet. The wench, twisting and wriggling under him, struggling to free herself with her gown half torn and plastered against her body was more a threat to him than the bloody sword she had attacked him with.

While he was the one seemingly in control, he was gradually beginning to get the feeling that he’d soon end up being the vanquished, and she, the victorious. She continued to put up a fight against him, the mere touch of her breasts enough to set his cock twitching, his alarming reflex leaving him confused and distressed. This is what happens when I’m away from Cersei for too long, he thought, cursing himself for his unbidden arousal. He shifted slightly so that it wouldn’t be too obvious, hoping the wench wouldn’t take note of the embarrassment his body was causing him. She was anything but desirable, and if a man like him who despised her and never missed a chance to ridicule her was reduced to reacting the way he did, it showed his level of desperation. His response was a proof that the pent up frustration inside him had reached its peak and soon needed an outlet. And Cersei was the only one who could relieve him of this stress. He had to get back to his sister soon!

“Are you going to get off me or not?” she demanded impatiently, her cheeks colouring as she followed his gaze. Shaken out of his trance by her stern voice, he realized that he had been shamelessly gaping down her gown. “Stop staring at me like I’m a bloody piece of meat.”

Ashamed, he immediately shifted his gaze to a puddle nearby, regretting what he had just done. An uncomfortable warmth creeping up his neck, he was about to apologize for his unintentionally indecent gesture and release her, when there came a vaguely familiar voice from behind him announcing a third presence in their vicinity.

“Is there a problem?”

Jaime caught his breath, recognizing the voice as the farmer they had met at the inn. Something was wrong about him, something he couldn’t quite put his finger on, something that was definitely bound to get them into trouble soon if he failed to act quickly. That apart, given the situation they were caught in right now, the fear that Brienne might blurt out the truth to him in a fit of fury was starting to nag him. Her prejudice against him was at its peak, enough for him to conclude that she didn’t trust him, her constant fear that he might take undue advantage of her sex increasing his apprehension that she might cry rape if he didn’t get off her soon. Not that he cared a damn even if she did, for the old man was no match for him. In fact, killing him would rid them of this nuisance once and for all, but what if he was innocent? Strangely, for the ruthless warrior he had been all his life, taking an unnecessary life now seemed unfair to him, against the morals of a true knight.

The wench and her stupid ideals are beginning to rub on me, he realized, flustered that he was beginning to be influenced by her to such a disturbing extent.
Nevertheless, he had to find a way to explain their presence, to justify the state they had been found in. A dirty, wet and disheveled couple in the middle of wilderness, locked in an intimate embrace - what could they possibly be up to? That gave him an idea, something he’d never believed himself capable of doing, a decision he might probably regret later.

“I apologize for what I’m about to do, wench,” he spoke very fast, his pulse several notches higher in anticipation of what he was going to do. “This means nothing, and I do not harbour any ill intent towards you,” he assured her, wanting her to be mentally prepared.

Before she could question him, or retaliate, his mouth was on hers.

Her eyes widened in shock, but with her arms still under his grip, the only thing she could do to express her objection was struggle harder. But it only ended up having a contrasting effect on him, her pebble-hard nipples pushing into his chest increasing his agony, filling him with an insane urge to deepen the kiss, though he dared not do so for obvious reasons. *Her lips are softer than I expected,* he observed, surprised with himself for paying her so much attention.

Her breath mingled with his, leaving him dizzy and his brain empty. Seconds later, logic returned to him, followed by a fleeting thought of what the wench might think of him if he disregarded her doubtless disapproval of his act. That brought him to his senses, preventing him from doing anything he might regret later. Convinced that he had made his point to the stranger, he decided to let her go. Before he released her lips, he met her eyes, silently telling her that all he intended was a little act to fool the intruder who seemed to be taking a keen interest in their affairs. She blinked once, giving him a slight nod. While he wasn’t entirely sure if she had interpreted his message correctly, her breathing returned to normal and she relaxed under his hold.

Only then did he deem it safe enough to break the kiss.

“If you want to get away from here alive, just play along quietly. Don’t resist me, and don’t attempt any sudden movements,” he whispered into her lips. “I’m going to release you. If you attack me in that man’s presence, remember, our identities will be revealed and the game is over once and for all.”

Relinquishing his hold on her hands, he turned around without getting off her. Looking at the old man sheepishly, he pretended to be abashed at being caught doing something that should’ve been confined to his bedchambers. “Seven blessings to you,” he called out amiably, wishing their companion wouldn’t have too many questions.

“Oh, it’s you again,” said the man, eying them both curiously. “What brings you here, and why are you in such a sorry state?”

“Well,” Jaime cleared his throat. “My wife and I enjoy a good fight from time to time, it gets our juices flowing.” He gave Brienne a mischievous wink for effect, earning a glare in return. “As you know, we’ve been travelling for days, and with the weather turning rough, we wanted to wait out the rain. But boredom got the better of us and we decided to have a little… umm--” he deliberately paused “—sword-fight.” His eyes flicked to the sword lying nearby, drawing the man’s attention to it. “It turned into one hell of a heated sparring session, one thing led to another and we ended up—” he wanted to say *fucking,* but something in her eyes made him refrain from using the word “—we lost control of ourselves and just couldn’t keep our hands off each other,” he concluded his story, putting it as subtly as he could.

The man stared at them blankly, leaving Jaime wondering if his lie had worked or not. A long spell of silence later, he broke into a sly grin, his eyes flitting from their wet bodies and torn clothes to the swords lying by their side, finally settling at Brienne’s chest, lingering there long enough for Jaime to be hit by an unexpected feeling of rage. He felt his insides burn at the sight of the old man leering at
her. In an impulsive urge to protect her, he moved closer to her again, blocking her with his body, keeping her away from his lecherous eyes.

Fortunately, their visitor seemed to take that as a hint to leave them alone to continue with whatever they were doing. “I’ll be on my way,” he abruptly announced his exit, mounting his horse again. “Shouldn’t be disturbing you. Seven blessings, m’lord, m’lady!” With his greetings and a bow, he was gone, and Jaime finally heaved a huge sigh of relief, inadvertently collapsing against her, his face buried in her breasts.

He was totally unprepared for what came next, her piercing shriek nearly rendering him deaf. “Get the bloody hell off me atleast now!”

“Sorry,” he muttered hastily, rolling off her immediately.

The wench grabbed him by his shirt as she sat up. “How dare you do that?” she growled, fuming. “Why did you kiss me?”

“That was barely a kiss, wench,” he corrected her, while convincing himself at the same time. “If you thought that was how real kisses were, I presume you’ve never been kissed. It was just an illusion to fool an onlooker into believing in the fake show of passion between us,” he explained, his ears still burning. “That was as far from a kiss as a kiss could ever be, but how would you know?”

When she scowled in response, he decided to have some fun at her expense. “I could show you what an actual kiss feels like, all you have to do is say the word, and I’d be at your service day and night-”

“Enough,” she barked, releasing him. “I don’t care what you call it. Why did you inflict such a horror on me?”

Horror?Seriously? Granted this was no real kiss and he had kissed no woman barring Cersei, but never in his wildest dreams had he imagined anyone describing his kiss as something remotely close to horror.

“I’m sorry about that,” he apologized, now wondering what had come over him to do such a thing. “I did it to save our lie, and like it or not, it worked, wench. That man was convinced that we really were--” he hesitated “--you know what he thought,” he finished tamely.

“Have I not told you earlier that nothing gives you the right to touch me like that?” She glowered at him, gritting her teeth. “When I said that, I thought I made myself clear, but you being the dishonourable man that you are, you can’t stand a woman being your equal, or worse still, better than you. All you want is a chance to prove your authority, an opportunity to show me the superiority of your sex!”

“Shall I call him back?” he snapped, irked by her childish stubbornness. “You could tell him the truth so that we can be captured and taken to Roose Bolton to be skinned alive and tied to a post somewhere to rot in the sun, a meal for crows and other scavengers that walk the land. That’d satisfy you, I suppose.”

Her expression changed, rage giving way to something else. “I’d rather die than be violated by men like you,” she said quietly, her eyes shining.

This was another of those rare moments when her words stung him like hell despite his effort to pretend he didn’t care. Men like me? I’d never violate you, wench, not even in my worst nightmares!

“I’ve told you, I mean you no harm,” he repeated for the millionth time, this time with complete
sincerity, hoping it would allay her fears. “I had no intention, whatsoever, of taking advantage of
you, my lady,” he admitted, suddenly guilty of his thoughtless act. “I’ve been called many things-
dishonourable, a ruthless murderer, an oathbreaker—” he looked away, unable to face her “—but
never a womanizer. I would never even touch a woman’s hand without her consent, let alone violate
her honour. It was an impulsive move, with only the intention to keep us safe from trouble. I
apologize in case I’ve offended you.”

For a while she didn’t reply. Then at last, she nodded. “We can forget this ever happened,” she said,
mollified by his apology. “Though, I wouldn’t entirely believe you, for you’d go to any extent to get
on my nerves. I think we can both agree that you’ve touched more than my hand in the last few
days.” Her tone, though accusing, bore no trace of anger or disgust this time. Did this mean that she
was on the path to change her derogatory opinion about him?

“Every time I did that, it was the need of the hour and nothing more,” he explained, making his stand
clear. “I love only Cersei, and for that sole reason I’ve resisted women far prettier than you. Why
would I throw myself on you without reason? Does it even make sense, wench?”

“No, it doesn’t,” she concurred. “One thing baffles me though, why did you spare that man?” she
wondered aloud, looking at him in disbelief. “He was an old man, alone, and you were armed.
You’ve suspected him from the beginning. You could’ve easily killed him. Why didn’t you?”

“There’s a chance that he could be just an innocent passer-by,” Jaime couldn’t believe himself say
that. “Why take an unnecessary life when things could be settled in other ways?”

She gaped at him. “Since when did the cold-blooded Kingslayer who revelled in bloodbaths begin to
show mercy to potential spies or murderers?”

Ever since he fell under the influence of the stupidly righteous and honourable wench he’s been
forced to tolerate night and day, he told himself, thinking if he’d been an idiot and taken a wrong
decision. I should stop behaving like her, he thought, resolving to be careful in future.

“This might disappoint you, but I’m not exactly the villain you often hope I’d be,” he said,
conveniently avoiding the real reason behind his move. “I don’t approve of unwarranted killings.”

She scoffed. “Does that include Aerys Targaryen as well?”

If he thought she could be friendly to him, he was mistaken. There she was, the same old wench
again who would spare him nothing but hatred and sarcasm. Wanting to avoid another argument,
Jaime changed the subject, getting to his feet and straightening his clothes. “We should leave. If our
friend turns out to be a spy, he might return with reinforcements. Sitting here for eternity isn’t going
to lead us anywhere.”

Picking up the swords and their bag, he began walking, expecting her to get up and join him. He was
gone a few feet, but there was no sign nor sound of the wench around him. When he stopped to
check on her, he was surprised to see her still sitting where she was, clutching at her leg with a
grimace on her face.

At once, he retraced his steps, hurrying to her. “What’s wrong?”

“My leg,” she groaned, gingerly massaging the spot where he had kicked her. “I’m unable to move
it. I can’t get up.”

Yet again, I’m responsible for your pain.

A wave of remorse rising in his chest, he knelted by her side. “Let me see.” He bent to examine the
extent of the damage he had caused.

But the instant he touched her, she flinched and pulled her leg away, the movement leaving her in so much pain that it was evident on her face. “Don’t,” she stopped him. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” he snapped back, miffed that she wouldn’t trust him. “I can help.”

“I don’t need your help,” she said coldly, stretching her leg again, but covering her thighs protectively with her hands. “Not after you’ve inflicted injury upon injury on me.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, unable to see her suffering. “I didn’t mean to hurt you this time. You lunged at me, and what I attempted was merely self defence.” When she looked away, he came closer again. I’ll never hurt you again, he promised to himself, knowing that if he voiced his assurance he’d only be scoffed at. “Stop behaving like a child and let me look at it.”

She turned to him, her eyes full of anger and pain. “Do you expect me to trust the word of an oathbreaker?”

For the first time, he swallowed his pride and her insult. “No, but I’m the only option you have.”

“You just wanted to kill me sometime back.”

“So did you, wench,” he said, frustrated that she refused to listen. “I think it’s time to let the past be and suppress our hatred for each other. We’re now facing a common enemy, and the only way to beat them is by working together.”

“I don’t think I ever can trust you, Kingslayer.”

Her words stung like poison, for no one had ever spoken such a blunt truth to his face before. But now was not the time to dwell on such unpleasantness. “You have no other alternative, unless you plan to sit here, an open invitation to rapists, murderers and the gods only know what else that prowls the woods.”

She studied him carefully. “With what confidence do you wish to help me? Do you trust that I wouldn’t betray you?”

He had no straight answer to that. “I’ve decided to put up with you, and so should you.”

The wench dropped her gaze thoughtfully, mulling over his words. At last, she reluctantly took her hands off her legs, a wordless consent that he could touch her. He slid her dress up to check the severity of her injury, but the moment her knees were exposed, she bent over her legs in an attempt to cover them.

“Don’t worry, I’m not interested,” he assured her, his face burning at the sight that lay before him. She seemed to believe him, for she finally allowed him a glimpse of her long and never ending legs. Surprised to find them smooth and shapely as compared to the misshapen tree trunks he had imagined, he had to make a conscious attempt to focus on the injury which was a nasty purple bruise.

“Never thought it’d be this bad,” he remarked, not quite sure of what to do to alleviate her pain.

“I’ll be fine, it’s just a little bruise,” she dismissed his concern. “We have to leave this place.” She made to get up, but lost her balance.

He caught her in his arms. “Easy, wench,” he breathed, seating her in the same position again. “Try
not to exert too much pressure on the leg. You need some rest.”

“I can’t afford to rest,” she cried. “What if he comes back?”

Jaime gave it a thought, then decided to heed her advice. “Very well, we can get out of here and find a place suitable enough for you to rest.” Getting to his feet, he held out his hand. “Lean on me, I’ll support your weight,” he offered, recalling the time he had carried her up a flight of stairs.

This time she made no fuss, accepting his help without question or comment, a pleasant contrast to earlier when she had raised a hue and cry when he had sincerely meant her well. One arm around her waist and the other supporting her arm which was around his shoulder, he became her crutch. They limped together in silence that was both awkward and peaceful.

Twice she stumbled, once over a dead branch in their path and then over a small rock, and both the times he was there for her, catching her on time, holding her tight so she wouldn’t fall, ignoring the alarming sensations set off by even the faintest brush of her breasts against his chest.

“Do you still hate me as much as you did earlier?” he tried to begin a conversation to break the unbearable quiet. Holding her wet body against his was a tremendous distraction, he needed another distraction to fight it off.

She evaded his question. “Why do you ask?”

“It’s a long way to King’s Landing,” he whined. “How do you propose we pass the time?”

“By putting one foot in front of the other,” she retorted in her usual wench-like tone.

He chuckled, glad that the tension had dissipated. “You’re back to normal, which is good news,” he said, relieved to hear the snark return to his voice. *I’m back to my usual self too.* “It means you’ve forgiven me.”

She glared at him, opening her mouth to say something nasty. But before she could attack him with her next onslaught of words, the rain poured down again, soaking them to the bone.

Jaime thought quickly. They had to find some place to shield themselves. “There’s a cluster of trees,” he said, pointing to a dense patch a few feet away, glad to have been saved the punishment of the verbal sparring they had been heading towards had it not been for the unexpected mercy of the rain. “We can take cover there. That’ll save us from the rain, while your leg can recuperate as well.”

The wench said nothing, which he took as a yes, and they moved towards their destination, the slippery moss-covered ground wet from the fresh rain making it even more difficult for him to balance them both to safety.

“There you go.” He helped her sit down on a dead log that appeared strong enough to bear her weight.

Panting, he looked around, keeping his eyes and ears open, wary of unexpected attacks that might surprise them any time. They weren’t completely under cover, for the rain still continued to fall through the trees, though much lesser in intensity.

Forgetting that he was around, the wench began washing herself, scrubbing the mud off her skin and her dress. When she bent, Jaime caught sight of her breasts, exposed and directly in his line of sight. Reddening, he forced himself to avert his gaze. Unable to resist, though, he kept glancing at her out of the corner of his eye from time to time, trying not to be bothered as he watched her slide her dress above her knees to wash her legs clean.
“Will you stop doing that?” he chided her, distressed that it was affecting him so much. “What if someone sees you like this?” he said, making a lame excuse for his objection.

Flustered, she pulled down her gown immediately and straightened her posture. “I forgot you were around.” She shifted uncomfortably on her perch, conscious of his presence, crossing her arms around her chest in a defensive stance. Her eyes were fixed on the ground, a wordless message that she wished to avoid communication and conversation with him.

He turned away, offering no explanation this time for his blatant display of interest. *She knows it’s accidental, and it means nothing,* he reassured himself, *so no harm done.*

Minutes went by, the tip-tap of the rain and the occasional distant howl of some stray wild beast their only company. With the wench still staring at the puddle by her feet, it fell upon Jaime to keep a continuous watch on their surroundings.

Things were peaceful, but not for long. A rustle of leaves was followed by the sound of hooves ominously close to them, and Jaime was sharp enough to realize that they were no longer alone. He rushed to the wench, pulling her to her feet. “We have to move quickly.” Grabbing her, he shoved her into a nearby clump of bushes, crouching beside her.

“What--”

He clamped a hand to her mouth and held her tightly. “Someone’s around,” he hissed. Forced into bodily contact with her once more, he tried to ignore the woman in his arms, thinking about the problem that was looming over them instead.

“Come out, whoever you are,” called a voice from not far away. “We know you’re there.”

Trapped with no means of escape and no better ideas, they had no choice but to reveal themselves. Her leg now better, the wench no longer needed his support and was able to walk by herself. They reluctantly came out of their hiding, dismayed that they were surrounded by at least a dozen horsemen.

Outnumbered. Vanquished. Lost.

“Looks like we’ve run into something interesting,” observed the man at the head of the group, a bearded fellow who looked like a thug. His eyes were on Brienne, leaving Jaime instantly disgusted with the way he eyed the wench.

“The wife and I were just having a good time,” Jaime said, putting aside his distaste for the man’s blatant expression of lust. “We’re no harm to you--” he stopped, only now noticing their sigil “Flayed man of the house Bolton,” he observed, making a face. “A bit too gruesome for my taste.”

“Sure, he’s the one?” their adversary asked an old man who emerged from among them. Jaime froze when he recognized him.

“That’s him alright, the Kingslayer,” the farmer confirmed. “I saw him fight at the tourney in Willem Frey’s wedding.”

Jaime glared at him, rueing his foolish decision to spare him. *I should’ve killed him right then, instead I chose to think like the wench, tried to be honourable and righteous.* Realizing that their game was up, he resorted to something that Lannisters did best. “Let us go, and my father will pay you whatever you want,” he tried to negotiate with the leader, hoping he’d fall for the offer.

“Enough to buy me a new head?” he mocked. “If the King in the North hears that I had the
Kingslayer and let him go, he’d be taking it right off. I’d rather he takes yours.”

Jaime exchanged a wordless glance with the wench. Resigned to their fate, they surrendered to the group, allowing themselves to be taken by them. “For god’s sake, she’s a lady,” he spat, his blood boiling when one of men deliberately manhandled Brienne, brushing his hand against her breasts as he dragged her along. “Treat her like one, you idiots,” he shouted, glaring at the leader.

“The name’s Locke,” the man introduced himself. “Why do you care about a woman who’s just your captor, Kingslayer?” he taunted. “Gone soft on her after fucking her? Lovers now, are you?”

Biting the inside of his cheek to control his anger, Jaime ignored the deliberate provocation, unable to stand the sight of the wench struggling against the men who seemed to be touching and groping her in all the wrong places. “At least allow the lady to wear something more appropriate,” he requested, wanting her to don her usual men’s clothes. The torn and transparent gown made her a walking bait for lusty predators. “She’s injured, I can help her change--”

“And why should I trust you, Kingslayer?” Locke grinned, throwing Brienne a lecherous glance, his eyes never leaving her chest. “Why don’t I keep a watch while she changes?”

A fresh surge of anger shot through Jaime. “Over my dead body.”

“That’s not a choice you have, I’m afraid,” Locke said, winking at Brienne. “Besides, what’s in it for you to lose? She’s ugly, not really your woman, and it’s not that there’s something great under that dress, just a pair of pretty little tits which I’d like to--”

“Shut up, you fucking bastard!” Jaime lunged towards the group, struggling violently against the men who held him. “I’m the prisoner of value, let her go--”

He was rudely interrupted with a blow to his face, the taste of his blood silencing him.

“Leave it be,” Brienne pacified him. “There’s no point resisting.”

“She seems to be far more sensible than you are,” Locke intervened. “Why don’t you be a good boy and listen to her?”

Knowing better than to counter them, Jaime swallowed his rage, watching helplessly as they took turns to mishandle her. Her ordeal ended for the time being when they were bound together on a horse, tied back-to-back.

Thus began their ride of imprisonment, painful and uncomfortable with their backs bumping into each other with every jerk and lurch. But nothing was worse than the fear that gripped him, fear for her honour and her life, the bawdy song that the men sang while they rode only adding to his apprehension.

“When we make camp tonight, you’ll be raped,” he voiced the thought that had been tormenting him from the second those men set eyes on Brienne. “More than once. None of these fellows have ever been with a noblewoman. For your own good, don’t resist, give them what they want--”

Her voice was calm when she spoke. “Would I?”

Jaime shook his head in exasperation. The stupid woman failed to understand the gravity of the situation. “They’ll knock your teeth out,” he tried again.

“You think I care about my teeth?”
“If you fight them they’ll kill you, do you understand?” His tone was unnaturally soft and his concern for her, heart-felt. “Let them have what they want. It doesn’t matter, think of them as Renly,” he advised, more worried for her life than her honour now. His worst fears told him they’d first rape her and then skin her alive her bit by bit, torturing her into oblivion.

“If you were a woman, would you have let them do it?”

Taken aback by her question, he gave her an honest reply. “If I were a woman, I’d rather have died than let them violate me.”

He expected a cutting response to that, but none came. He couldn’t see her face, but he could sense her distress even in her silence. “Why did you defend me?” she asked him after a while. “These men knew who we were from the beginning. There was no need for you to pretend we were married, so why this act of chivalry?”

To this question, Jaime had no answer, but for the first time, he felt genuinely sorry for the wench, and concerned for her honour and life. Helpless that he could do nothing to protect her, he stared at the sky, defeated and deflated.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: I will be resuming updates as soon as the show ends.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

This chapter's mostly faithful to canon, of course interspersed with the happenings of this story...

Their ride towards impending doom continued with long periods of heavy silence interspersed with Jaime trying to convince Brienne to let go of her stubbornness and bend her knee to their captors.

“Why don’t you, for once, heed my advice, wench?” he brought up the subject again, his voice bearing an uncharacteristic hint of concern, one which she’d never heard before. “Better to forego your honour than--”

“--than what?” she hit back, irked by his illogical reasoning. “I’d rather die than have their filthy hands all over me.” She shuddered at the thought of a dozen men forcing themselves on her.

“It would be a waste of a death,” he remarked with no spite nor sarcasm in his tone.

Brienne was quiet for a while. “Why are you doing this?” she asked him again, unable to believe his change in demeanour towards her.

“Doing what?” he snarled, his sudden anger unwarranted for she’d said nothing to offend him.

“Not less than a few hours ago you were about to bite my neck off--”

“That was you,” he roared, attracting the attention of the horseman riding closest to them. “You tried to kill me.” He toned his voice down to a whisper when the man glared at him. “I tried to help you--”

“--not before injuring me again.”

There was a pause before he answered, but when he spoke, his tone was much softer with a bit of regret in it, and if it hadn’t been for their sour history and what he thought of her, it could’ve been mistaken for remorse. “I apologized for that. What more do you want me to do?” He leaned into her, and his touch, to her surprise, felt strangely comforting.

To that, she chose to say nothing, but the problem that arose when she remained silent was that even in their dire state of hopelessness her attention was diverted by his proximity, irritation flooding her when she remembered how flustered she’d been when he touched her. He was supposed to be her adversary, the man she’d sworn to protect but hate, so why the hell did his closeness affect her so much?

“When I was kingsguard to Aerys Targaryen,” he began speaking again, and she felt him stiffen against her back, “I had to stand outside his door every night helplessly, listening to him rape his wife.” There was bitterness in his voice, an obvious indication that he loathed the memory and the king for his heinous act. “I was sworn to the king, so all I could do was pretend it wasn’t happening, to ignore her screams, her indirect plea for help.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” she asked, pondering the motive behind his revelation.
“I just--” he seemed to search for a reason “--just wanted you to know.”

Brienne fell silent, staring at the sky, knowing not what to say next. Twilight was setting in, and the man named Locke began barking orders to his men to set up camp in a clearing one of their men had found a few metres away. The moment they got off their mounts, their captors wasted no time in binding them securely to trees separated by a good few feet.

When she caught Jaime’s eye, there was rage and sympathy in them. Half a dozen men leered at her like birds of prey circling their victim, waiting to pounce on her, eager to get their hands on her, impatient to have their fill of her, restraining themselves only because their leader had not yet given them his permission to have their way.

“You can take her to that corner,” Locke told them, much to their glee, “and once you get her all nice and wet, I’ll finish her off.”

Before he could even finish talking, they began untying her, touching and groping her while she kicked and screamed, trying to fend them off. But she was just one and they were too many, and though she struggled hard, she was overpowered and dragged to a dark corner, away from Jaime’s sight and secluded enough for the brutes to get from her what they sought. Three held her arms and legs while two tried to undress her, but Brienne wouldn’t give up, using her limbs, her head and whatever part of her body she could to resist. She ended up with a blow or two to her jaw, blood trickling down her mouth and her teeth broken, but she didn’t care, for even life was worth a price to pay for her honour.

Not far away, she could hear bits and pieces of Jaime trying to convince Locke that this was a bad idea. She heard him reveal her identity to the leader, lying to him that the Sapphire Isles housed most of the Westeros’ sapphire mines, tempting him with the reward that awaited him should he send her safely back home.

“Lord Selwyn would pay his daughter’s weight in sapphires,” she heard him spin his tale, “if she is returned to him, her honour un-besmirched.”

“Un-besmirched?”

“Not defiled,” Jaime explained.

There was silence and Locke seemed to consider him for a moment. To her relief, Jaime’s plan was successful, for he called his men off her, ordering them to bring her back and tie her up in front of Jaime. But Jaime didn’t shut up after that. Fresh from his success, he flashed her a smug smile and went on to negotiate his release with the head-thug, tempting him with the gold his father would give him for his safe return.

As she studied Locke's face, she sensed that something was wrong when he had Jaime untied, offering him supper and treating him with unnatural courtesy. Locke didn't seem to be that gullible a man, so something was definitely off with what she saw.

What came next proved her instincts right, Jaime's blood curdling scream chilling her to the bone.

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Brienne sat there for while, watching him, for the first time filled with pity for the fierce lion who was now reduced to a wounded beast with his paw chopped off. He lay in a corner, slumped against the tree, staring into nothingness, his food lying by his side, untouched.

“Eat,” she said, more gruffly that she’d intended to.
Jaime merely shook his head morosely and went back to brooding in silence.

“What are you doing?” she asked in the same harsh tone when she’d failed to extract a reaction from him.

“Dying,” he whispered.

“I thought you were many things,” she confessed, “but coward was not one of them.”

“Coward?” he repeated feebly.

“I thought you were better than this,” she spat, desperate to trigger the response she wanted, “but I was wrong. You get one taste of life and you sit here, whining like a bloody woman. You lost a hand, you’re not dead.”

“I was that hand,” he lamented, filling her with a pang of guilt.

“You need to live,” she tried to motivate him, “to take revenge.”

When he didn’t budge, she decided to try harder. “Eat,” she ordered him again, and this time he obeyed her.

“I saw what you did for me. Why did you lie to him about the Sapphire isles?” she asked him slowly.

“Why did you help me?”

He looked away with clearly no inclination to answer her.

His silence driving her to uneasiness, she wondered if he’d taken their wedding a bit too seriously.

“If you felt honour bound to me because I’m your wife, there's no need--”

“You won’t be my wife for long,” he barked, incensed by her suggestion, “don’t forget that, wench.”

“I haven't forgotten that it is no marriage after all,” she quietly replied, worried that she’d suddenly begun to see him in a new light.

Peace ensued after that and they finished their meagre meal and lay down on the floor. She stared at the stars awaiting the sleep which she knew wouldn’t come.

“Still awake?” she asked, missing his usual snores, hoping he’d get over this dreadful setback sooner than later.

“Hmm,” came his terse reply.

“You lied to them,” she brought up the matter that had been eating her for hours, “you knew it was a very big risk, so why--”

“If I hadn’t, they’d have torn you apart by now,” was his instant retort.

“We are to part company in a few days,” she reminded him, “so how does it matter to you whether I live or--”

“Shut up and go to sleep, woman,” he lashed out, his temper worse than usual.

And she did, after hours of gazing into emptiness, sleep finally took over, sending her into a confused sub-conscious state plagued by nightmares of men attempting to tear her clothes off.
Before she could have her fill of rest, dawn came, and with it the rest of their arduous journey. She and Jaime were dragged onto the same horse again, this time facing each other instead of their backs bound together. They had made him wear his detached, rotting hand around his neck like some sort of grotesque necklace.

“Get up.” She nudged him with her elbow when his head dropped to her shoulder. “You can’t give up. Don’t let them get to you.”

He muttered something incoherent and once again slumped into her, this time almost falling off the horse.

“He needs help,” Brienne cried out hoarsely, shifting her body to support him. “Can’t you see he’s suffering, he’ll die--”

“I don’t care, bitch,” Locke said indifferently, “we’re not stopping anywhere until we reach Harrenhal.”

From then on, she took it upon herself to continuously urge Jaime to stay awake and alive. For the first time since she met him, she feared for him, for his life and sanity, and this time her concern didn’t stem out of her oath to Lady Catelyn, but due to--what exactly, she couldn’t quite say.

“Keep your eyes open,” she kept muttering in his ear, straightening him when he gave up, hoping he’d prevail until this ordeal of a journey ended. She kept talking to him, at times encouragingly while at other times just scolding him, jolting him back to consciousness, her frustration that he’d end up dying because of her prickling her conscience every single second.

Despite her trying to prevent it, he fell from the horse once and foolishly tried to take on the men by grabbing one of their swords, but he was put down without much effort and he went crashing into the mud. What he had to endure next was humiliation beyond her imagination when he was made to drink horse piss, the insult adding to the pain they inflicted on him by repeatedly stamping on his wounded hand. “Stop it,” she shouted, her heart aching at his suffering as she crouched by his side, desperate to do something to alleviate his agony. But she was no good either, with her hands tied and severely outnumbered, a punch to her nose the only response her useless struggle evoked.

“I’m sure you’ve entertained him enough,” Locke said suggestively, his eyes dropping to her chest, “he was quite keen on saving you for himself. I don’t see why you can’t oblige us. If you can be his whore--”

“Don’t you fucking call her that, she’s no whore, she’s my--” Jaime gasped, crumpling into the mud on all fours. “She’s a highborn lady, call her--call her by her….” he trailed away, losing consciousness.

They had managed to revive him and get him back on the horse and within the next couple of hours they were at the gates of Harrenhal. When they were presented before Roose Bolton, Brienne was pleasantly surprised, for he seemed to be far more considerate than his men, even chivalrous towards her, showing her the respect befitting a lady.

Jaime was taken away to an old man called Qyburn who was to tend to his wounds while Brienne requested for a bath and a fresh set of clothes.

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Brienne let the warmth of the water sink into her and began washing the grime off, scrubbing herself clean, her mind constantly diverted by Jaime, wondering how he was and if he’d received the
requisite treatment.

“Not so hard, you’ll scrub the skin off!”

There he stood, at the entrance of the bath, undressing with the help of the man who escorted him. Aware at once of her naked state, she shrank to one corner, covering her breasts instinctively and folding her legs so that he could see nothing. “There’s another tub,” she cried out in panic when she saw him heading towards the one she was in.

“This one suits me just fine.”

She couldn’t help sneaking a glance at him as he strolled towards her, naked as his name day, looking like half-a-god and half-a-corpse. In spite of the sorry state he was in, maimed and malnourished, devoid of rest and wounded, he was quite fit, his strong arms and chest, not to mention his broad shoulders distracting her to an insane extent, filling her head with thoughts she’d never imagined she’d harbour for the Kingslayer. He descended into the tub and settled down at the opposite corner, keeping a safe distance from her and wasted no time in engaging in his favourite pastime, his usual provocation of her and his mockery of her skills, leaving her wondering if he was the same man who’d saved her from rape not long ago.

“I thought you were better than this,” he taunted, “if you hadn’t started our petty fight, that fucking old man wouldn’t have found us, we wouldn’t have been slowed down and wouldn’t have been captured—”

“Are you blaming me for what happened?” She couldn’t believe his accusation.

“I never thought you were this short-sighted,” he went on, fixing her with a piercing glare, “no wonder Renly died with you guarding him—”

Unwilling to take any more of his nonsense, she shot to her feet, splashing water all around her and outside the tub. Jaime regarded her, his eyes lingering on her nude skin, taking her in, and while that should’ve made her uncomfortable, all she felt was pure, unadulterated indignation at his shallow opinion of her.

“That was unworthy,” he immediately said, his gaze softening, “forgive me.”

“Don’t you mock me,” she said, clenching her teeth, her voice abnormally low for the rage burning in her chest.

“I’m apologising,” he reiterated, “I’m tired of fighting. Let’s call a truce.”

“You need trust to have a truce.” She stood in front of him in all her nakedness, unashamed that she was baring it all to him, not in the least bothered about her modesty.

“I trust you,” he said softly, looking up to meet her eyes.

When she drank in his gaze, she knew at once that he wasn’t mocking her, not this time. Mollified, she retreated to her corner of the tub.

“There’s the look,” he said bitterly, studying her, “for seventeen years, I’ve seen it, on face after face-” he had to make an effort, muster all his strength to keep talking “—Kingslayer, oathbreaker, man without honour…”

And with that, the dam was broken. He kept talking like a man in a trance and there was no stopping
him as he recounted the story of how he’d gained his derogatory title. He told her about the sacking of King’s landing, about how he’d begged Aerys to surrender when Robert's rebellion was upon them. When he started, she wondered why he bothered with repeating the story she’d grown up hearing, but there was a compelling edge to his tone, and despite her resistance, she listened to him in rapt attention as he drewled on about the truth of his worst deed ever.

The pain in his eyes grew when he told her what the mad king’s true intentions were, about the caches of wildfire Aerys had hidden, how he’d planned to burn down thousands of men, women and children and how he, Jaime, had decided that he could no longer stand and watch the atrocities of the man he’d sworn to protect. The sincerity in his speech and his raw emotions, the pent up misery inside him as he spoke about it drew her to him, to lend him an ear and… sympathize with him.

“I shoved the sword in his back,” he finished, concluding the hitherto unknown tale of how he’d saved the population of King’s Landing with the act that had earned him his worst reputation ever.

Brienne knew not why, but she found herself beginning to believe in him, in his honour. “If this is true, why didn’t you tell Lord Stark?”

Jaime scoffed. “Ned Stark judged me guilty the moment he set eyes on me,” he said, the agitation in his voice mounting as he attempted to get up. “By what right does the wolf judge the lion, by what right—”

Before he could finish, his strength gave way and his knees caved in, but Brienne was there for him, leaping to her feet and catching him in her arms before he could crash headlong into the water. “Help, the Kingslayer,” she cried out, holding him close to her chest.

“Jaime,” he said breathlessly, his eyes searching hers for approval before they fluttered shut, “my name’s Jaime.” With that, he fainted in her arms, leaving her standing there, wet, naked and helpless, perceiving the unconscious knight she held with new-found respect and regard.

Men, about three or four, rushed into the room hearing her cry, and with their help she got Jaime out of the tub, but the instant he was out, he regained consciousness, only to retch, throwing up all over himself and showering the people around him with vomit. The men assisting Brienne immediately let go, their expressions that of disgust and revulsion.

“Get me a towel,” she ordered her nearest captor, ignoring the putrid stench that filled her nostrils. “Quick.” she shouted, when he stood there, unresponsive.

Settling Jaime down beside the tub, she first washed herself. Then she began cleaning him, washing the vomit off his face and body. It was repulsive, no doubt, but the man deserved none of this, and there was no way she was going to leave him at the mercy of these bastards. “Get us some clean clothes,” she demanded when she’d finished scrubbing him clean with soap and water, only now realizing that she too was completely naked with four pairs of lustful eyes staring at her hungrily.

Not much later she was handed a pair of robes. After forcing Jaime into one, she donned the other and when they were covered enough to leave the baths, she supported him to the chambers they were allocated.

“You can leave now,” she told her escort once she’d settled Jaime onto the bed.

“I’m your guard,” the man spat, “not your fucking handmaiden. I will not come and go as you please.”

“Then guard us,” Brienne retorted, “stand outside and not in here. Don’t you dare stare at me. Now,
why don’t you get the hell out of here while I try to sort him out?” she added, worried about Jaime’s hand and what might happen if the wound festered.

Their guard gave her a look of pure loathing, but decided against arguing. He left the room wordlessly, leaving her alone with Jaime. She quickly rummaged through the bundle of clothes kept on a nearby table, presumably for them, and found a hideous pink gown. That was the only option for her, for there was no man’s garb that would fit her.

Stripping off her robe, she reached out for the pink abomination--

“And at last I get to see my wife naked,” Jaime’s teasing voice wafted from the bed, leaving her frozen to the spot.

“I didn’t know you were awake.” She hastily pulled the gown to her chest, covering her breasts.

“Don’t look at me,” she snapped when he didn’t bother to look away.

“It’s too late for you to hide behind that wretched dress, wench... if you can call that a dress,” he commented, as he continued gaping at her, “I’ve seen it all, you left nothing to my imagination a few minutes back.”

“Shut your mouth and stop staring,” she scolded him, not sounding as firm as she would’ve liked to.

Burning all over, she clumsily pulled the gown over her head. It was a little too tight for her comfort, leaving a lot more of her chest exposed than she’d have preferred, but it was either this or nothing, and Jaime looking at her like that wasn’t helping much. Despite her admonishment, he never took his eyes off her for even a second, and just as he had reacted to her sudden nakedness in the tub, he gazed into her eyes and not at her partially-clothed body.

She couldn’t fathom the look in his eyes. It was far from lecherous, for she knew he lusted after none but his sister, but was it… respect? gratitude? She’d never know unless he told her what really ran through his mind. “I know what you did down there for me, you didn’t cringe even a bit, you weren’t bothered with how filthy I was,” he said softly, the teasing edge to his tone now completely gone, “I wasn’t so unconscious that I couldn’t make out--”

She cut him at once, ill at ease with his uncharacteristic praise of her. “You need rest.” Once fully dressed, she strode to his bedside, gently pushing him down. “Don’t talk, don’t waste your strength.”

He obeyed her for a change, shutting his mouth instantly and allowing her to wipe the sweat off his forehead with with a dry towel. As she felt his eyes on her, a surge of nervousness shot through her, her hands shaking as she went about her task.

When she drew away, he sat up again. “Those men downstairs were blatantly staring at you,” he said, his tone dripping with annoyance.

“How do you know? You fainted--”

“I told you, I wasn’t entirely out of my senses,” he hissed, his face red with indignation, his jaw stiffening. “I know that look, every one of them wanted to get their dirty hands all over you, those scumbags--” his left fist clenched in rage “--you should’ve covered yourself before tending to me.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said dismissively, fiddling with the bedspread for want of something to do, “I came to no harm. After what you did last night, I doubt any of them will touch me again.”

“Hmm.” He relaxed at last and slumped back into his pillow, fatigue and pain taking over again. “Do you believe my story?” he changed the subject after a while, “or do you, like Ned Stark, think I--”
“I believe you,” she whispered, yet to come to terms with her change of heart towards him.

He said nothing after that, but continued to watch her intently as she made quite a task of removing his bandage and wrapping the wound with a clean cloth, her hands fumbling and faltering more than once as she grew increasingly conscious of his eyes on her.

“I’ll have Qyburn take a look at you,” she said at last and made to get up, but he caught her wrist.

“Why are you doing this for me, Brienne?”

Her eyes leapt to meet his in shock and surprise. *Brienne, not wench.*

Having no answer to his question, she took the easy way out, deflecting him with a question of her own. “Why did you defend my honour last night?”

All she got in response was a heavy sigh.

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When Jaime woke the next morning, his hand was much better, far from the agony he’d been going through over the last countless hours. He vaguely remembered Qyburn changing his bandages and giving him milk of the poppy to sleep last night. This time again, he had tried to put him off, but Brienne insisted that he have some.

A few seconds later was when he noted the presence of a warm body next to him.

*The wench in my arms yet again, fast asleep… Can it get more complicated than that?*

He was about to pull away when she stirred against him, pushing into him, and his cock sprang to life at once, contradicting his true intentions towards her, just like yesterday in that damned tub when he’d first seen her naked. He was far from attracted to her, so what then made him react the way he did every time she got close to him?
Cersei, he convinced himself, *she's all I want*.

But his mind refused to be evicted of the wench, settling down on the moment he confessed to her, filling him with disbelief at his own actions, at how he’d ended up spilling out his deepest, darkest secret to her. No one but Tyrion knew of all that he’d told her, so why the fuck had he gone on, blurtng his heart out to a complete stranger he’d met not long ago?

*Stranger? Really?* teased his brain, questioning his logic, challenging his thoughts.

“Stay away from me!”

Her harsh tone brought him back to his senses and he jerked his arm away immediately, releasing her. He sat up, watching her adjust the front of her dress. “Won’t you rather prefer me than one of those men?” he asked teasingly, back to his usual self that loved to provoke her.

“Don’t get me started--”

“Ofcourse there’s no comparison,” he went on, enjoying himself at the expense of her anger, “I’m your husband.”

It took him a great deal of effort not to stare as she valiantly pulled the flimsy fabric across her breasts, trying to cover herself from his prying eyes, but the gown being a tight fit, it hardly did much to serve the purpose. While that pleased him to an extent enough to alarm him, what he wasn’t looking forward to was the Bolton thugs lustng after her, staring at her bosom as they mentally fucked her. While he was contemplating about how best to remediate this, there was a loud knock on the door. Brienne answered it and in came Qyburn who began examining his wounds without wasting any time.

“My lord,” he cleared his throat as he worked on his stump, “If you wish, I could have some entertainment sent for you, a girl, she’s rather good, she can keep you company for the night,” he suggested, clearly eager to please Jaime.

Jaime’s eyes instantly flew to Brienne who looked away hastily, pretending not to have heard the conversation. “I don’t seek such company,” he refused him politely. “I’m not that sort of a man.” He spoke to Qyburn, but his eyes were fixed on the wench.

The old man followed his gaze, looking suspiciously between him and Brienne. “This woman--”

“--is a friend and a lady of noble birth,” Jaime shot back angrily, irked by his condescending tone while referring to the wench. “She’s Lady Brienne of Tarth, daughter of Lord Selwyn Tarth. I will not have anyone insult her.”

“My apologies,” Qyburn mumbled before leaving them alone once again.

“You really are faithful to your sister,” Brienne remarked as soon as they were the only ones in the room, “refusing a pretty whore does need a lot of willpower.”

*I am faithful to Cersei and I will always be.* He sighed, wondering if Cersei was the real reason behind his turning down Qyburn’s offer.

“You should get dressed too,” she reminded him, “Lord Bolton has asked us to lunch.”

By habit he reached for his robe with his right hand, and only then did he realize with a pang that he needed another to assist him with even his basic personal tasks. Not one to ask for help, he managed to get rid of the robe with some effort but struggled when it came to wearing his shirt.
Brienne watched him for a while. “Oh, move aside,” she finally said, jerking his hand away and taking control of his clothes. Once or twice her fingers brushed against the bare skin of his chest, and he drew in a sharp breath, forcing himself to calm down, telling himself that this was merely a helpless situation the gods had doomed him to, and the wench was nothing more than a helping hand.

“I’m done,” she said, but he kept standing where he was, unmoved.

“You’d have to do this everyday if we were really married,” he murmured, holding her gaze. “I—”

“We must go.” She stepped away, blushing furiously, and made her way to the door.

Mealtime with Roose Bolton turned out exactly as expected with the man admitting at first that he should’ve killed them both and burned their bodies. Out of the corner of his eye, Jaime saw Brienne clutching her knife and instantly grabbed her hand in a frantic urge to prevent her from doing something drastic and getting them both killed. Their eyes met for the briefest second, and he wordlessly assured her that he’d take care of this mess. It was only after he was convinced she wouldn’t kill Bolton that he released her hand.

The conversation finally took a positive turn, and with promises of rewards from Tywin Lannister, he eventually managed to convince Bolton to set them free. “My lady,” he said, raising his glass, relieved that their ordeal was over, “may our journey continue without further incident.”

“Oh, she won’t be going with you,” Bolton ruined their rare moment of happiness, leaving him unpleasantly surprised.

“I’m afraid I must insist,” Jaime pressed, fighting to maintain his composure despite the rage boiling inside him.

Bolton simply refused to relent, suggesting that the wench ought to be charged for treason. He called for his men, and three of them entered, seizing a kicking and thrashing Brienne into custody.

Jaime jumped to his feet, accidentally knocking down his glass of wine with his elbow. “Unhand her at once,” he demanded, unable to watch them drag her out of the hall.

“If I were you I’d count my blessings and not bother about women that don’t matter to me,” Bolton advised him. He wiped his hands and got up, indicating that the meeting was over. “You will be allowed to leave as soon as you’re well enough to travel.”

“I want to see her right away,” Jaime insisted, wishing he’d done something to prevent her terrible fate.

Thankfully, his request wasn’t denied and he was ushered to the room where they held her.

“When are you leaving?” she asked him as soon as they’d been left alone, her voice bearing no bitterness nor resentment that she was being left behind.

“As soon as I can,” he replied, guilt getting the better of him.

She remained unfazed. “Have they told you what they plan to do with me?”

He hung his head. “You’re to remain here—” he bit the inside of his cheek in anger, unable to bring himself to tell her the rest.

“--with Locke,” she guessed, her tone, once again, expressionless.
“I owe you a debt,” he began, mustering the courage to look her in the eye.

“When Catelyn Stark released us, we both made a promise to her. Now it’s your promise,” she said solemnly, piercing his soul with those astonishingly beautiful eyes. “Keep your word and consider the debt paid.”

Far from demanding her release, she never even made the smallest mention of her own captivity. Can someone really be this selfless? Jaime thought as he found himself nodding to her. “I’ll return the Stark girls to their mother,” he promised her, fearing she might not take his word. “I swear it.”

She said nothing beyond that, silently accepting the word of an oathbreaker, no questions asked. “Goodbye, Ser Jaime.”

Ser Jaime, not Kingslayer…

Those eyes showed more trust in him than the rest of the world put together and that, for Jaime, was oddly overwhelming. The lump in his throat obstructing his speech, all he could do was wordlessly promise her that he wouldn’t let her down, that he could be trusted, that her belief in him meant something to him… meant a lot, in fact to him.

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Escorted by a dozen Bolton men and Qyburn, Jaime was on his way home, on the way out of his troubles, but he was far from peaceful, his mind dwelling on Brienne every waking minute. Before leaving, he’d made sure Qyburn had sent out a raven to Lord Selwyn, informing him that his daughter was being held captive. He hoped Selwyn Tarth would offer a ransom good enough to keep his daughter’s honour and life intact.

She’ll be alright, he convinced himself as he lay down under a tree for some much-needed rest after a long and weary spell of riding. He drifted off as soon as his head touched the ground, the world around him fading into a blur.

“Get off me, you bastards,” Brienne yelled, kicking and flailing, fighting hard to keep them at bay, but they were one too many, tearing her clothes off, groping her, fondling her, leering at her.

“Not before we’ve got what we wanted, bitch,” spat one of them, pulling her breeches down and spreading her legs apart.

“Don’t you dare—” she tried to shout but they gagged her, and soon one of them had his pants down and his cock out.

He got into position, ready to force himself into her--

“Leave her alone, you cunts!” Jaime woke up with a start, reaching out for the sword that wasn’t there with the hand that no longer was part of him.

“What’s the matter, my lord?”

He sat up, sweating profusely and breathing heavily, only to find a worried Qyburn peering into his face. “A nightmare, I presume,” the old man surmised, sitting on the log beside him.

“Did you, by any chance, receive a letter from Brienne’s father?” he asked anxiously, sweat dripping down his forehead as he mentally recounted the horror that he’d just dreamed of.

Qyburn nodded. “Lord Selwyn offered three hundred gold dragons for his daughter’s safe return.”
“A fair offer,” Jaime remarked, relieved that Brienne would be safe despite his dream indicating the opposite.

“A fair offer, but Locke wouldn’t take it,” the older man replied, filling him with dread again.

“Why not?”

“He’s convinced Lord Tarth owns all the Sapphire mines in Westeros.”

Jaime tried to pacify himself that they’d let no harm come to her. “They’d be fools to kill her.”

Qyburn, however, didn’t seem to think so. “Oh, she’ll be their entertainment tonight,” he said, “beyond tonight, I don’t think they’ll care much.”

Her father has been informed, she isn’t my responsibility anymore… With that thought in mind, Jaime got to his feet, ready to move on with his journey home. But no sooner had he taken a few steps towards his horse, than he froze, remembering something.

I am hers, and she is mine, the words hit him like a bolt of lightning, from this day until the end of my days.

What if they brutally raped her? He couldn’t live with himself if her fate came to that. When he’d said those words in front of the Septon and cloaked her, he had brought her under his protection. He’d sworn a vow with the gods as witnesses, to keep her safe, so how could he just abandon her and ride away? She trusted him, believed in his honour, had faith that he’d uphold his vows.

And as always, Jaime did what his heart told him to do.

“We’re going back to Harrenhal,” he told the man called Steelshanks who seemed to be the leader of the group.

“Why?”

“I’ve left something behind.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

"You want her? Go get her."
So he did.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I hope I get to her on time...

Remorse was not an emotion that frequented Jaime, for he rarely regretted his actions despite them being, many a times, impulsive and rash. But this time was unlike any other before, it had been his lie that had put Brienne in peril. He’d done it in good intention, to talk her rapists out of the heinous treatment they were about to subject her to, but ever since Qyburn had spilled out the real reason behind Locke refusing a reasonable ransom for the wench’s release, he felt responsible. Deep down, for what was perhaps one of the lowest moments of his life, he felt miserable.

“May I ask you a question, my lord?” Busy brooding, he’d failed to notice that Qyburn who was riding by his side had been observing him. Without waiting for permission, the old man spoke again. “Lady Brienne,” he began, this time addressing her by her correct title, Jaime’s admonishment clearly fresh in his mind, “what is she to you?”

Jaime pondered for a second, no immediate answer coming to his mind. “My captor at first,” he revealed, realizing how much time had gone by since he’d first set eyes upon the wench’s homely face, “and then my prisoner,” he said, drawing a halt at that, deciding that this stranger had right to know no more than what was intended for general consumption.

The shrewd old man that Qyburn seemed to be, he didn’t look convinced, his keen eyes piercing Jaime like an arrow. “Is that all? You gave up your hand, your whole life, your identity as a knight… all that for just a prisoner?” His question took him by surprise, for Jaime truly had no straightforward reason for why he’d done what he’d done. “And now, you’re risking yourself back into the den of the people that maimed you for a woman who’s worth no more than--”

“She was no ordinary prisoner,” Jaime seethed, his insides boiling at the insult towards the wench.

“What, then, is she?” Qyburn waited, watching him like he were the most intriguing thing in the world.

_The only person who took my word, believed I’d honour the promise I made her_, Jaime sighed heavily, a pall of gloom descending into him as the worst possible images of her impending fate crowded his head, _my wife, though not in the real sense of the relationship. In the eyes of the gods, I am hers, and she is mine… until our marriage is broken apart, which soon shall be. But till that day dawns_...

“Ser Jaime?” Qyburn persisted, unwilling to give up.

“His whore, maybe?” one of the men passing them called out, throwing Jaime a suggestive wink,
“tell me, Kingslayer, what is she like down there?”

If he were his normal self, Jaime would’ve cut him down with one well-aimed swing of his sword, but today, he was nothing but a sad joke, an apology for a knight, dependent on an old man for the simplest of things and severely outnumbered by a horde of bloodthirsty men, who, but for the strict orders from their lord would only be too eager to cut off his other hand, and maybe a leg too for good measure should he choose to antagonize them. If he retaliated, he’d only cut a sorry figure, making matters worse for Brienne more than himself, for they had orders to keep him alive, while no such promises were made for the wench.

Despite swallowing his rage, he couldn’t control giving them a piece of his mind. “She’s no more a whore than you’re a knight,” he retorted, fighting to tone down the bitterness in his voice.

The man glared at him, his teeth clenched, his fingers gripping the hilt of his blade. To Jaime’s relief and, oddly, disappointment, he refused to be provoked, moving on after giving Jaime a look of pure loathing.

She’s a maiden, as chaste as one can ever be, he mused, hoping she’d remain one by the time he made it to her.

“With all due respect,” Qyburn began again once they were out of the earshot of the rest of their company, “you do realize this isn’t a very sensible idea, I hope. Lord Bolton’s given them his orders, no doubt, but his instructions were only to get you back to King’s Landing. As far as Locke’s concerned, there’s nothing stopping him from claiming another limb or two, should you attempt to stake a claim on his newly acquired plaything,” he warned.

“Do you think I don’t know that?” Jaime snapped, the reference to Brienne as a plaything getting on his nerves.

“I know these men,” said the older man in a patronising, fatherly tone, “the moment they come to know you’ve returned to snatch away their toy, they’d tear you apart, leaving only what is sufficient of you to keep you alive. Is taking such a risk for a woman you barely know worth your life?”

“With all due respect,” Jaime replied, mirroring Qyburn’s tone, “I need no unsolicited advice, because I’m not going to change my mind,” he said firmly, not bothering to keep the irritation off his voice this time, “I’m going back to King’s Landing with her--” he paused, hoping he’d taken the right decision, for an assertion such as this was bound to have downstream consequences “--or not at all.”

“Very well, my lord,” Qyburn gave up at last, “if you’ve made up your mind, I will say no more.”

The rest of their journey continued in silence, with the group choosing to share snide remarks among themselves, mostly in whispers and out of Jaime’s earshot. And that suited him just fine. What didn’t make it to his ears wouldn’t bother him anyway. Besides, it made no sense for him to concern himself with comments from petty whoremongers such as these.

He had bigger worries on his mind, like how he’d negotiate Brienne’s release. Locke wasn’t a man to be tempted by riches, but he wasn’t too immune to gold either, for if he was, he wouldn’t have rejected Lord Selwyn’s offer out of greed for more. Showing him the prospects of acquiring Lannister gold, of course, was the best way ahead for Jaime, but that brought him to the second big question on his mind. How would Tywin Lannister react when Jaime arrived at King’s Landing with Brienne accompanying him? What would happen if he came to know that Brienne was his wife? He could decide not to reveal their secret to Tywin, but he had to get the marriage annulled, and that definitely would make sure the truth made it to his father’s ears.
Worse still, how would Cersei react when she came to know that the wench was his wife?

*If she came to know,* the rational part of his brain prompted, for any knowledge of his forced tryst with marriage would put Brienne in unnecessary danger from Cersei’s jealousy, though his sister should have no reason nor ground to be jealous. Marriage to the wench was only a means to escape death, but would his sweet sister understand that and trust him? Would she let Brienne live in peace even if he promised her that this wedding was nothing but an agreement that would soon be terminated. He loved Cersei, but he also knew her, well enough to decide that her wrath, if unleashed on Brienne, would mean her downfall, and even perhaps a fatal end for her. The fact that Brienne was out to steal Sansa Stark from under her nose would only add fuel to the fire.

*I have to keep it a secret, from Cersei’s prying eyes, and maybe from father’s too…*

“Is something else troubling you, my lord?” It was Qyburn again.

“Nothing,” Jaime muttered, “let’s keep going. We need to get there as soon as--”

“We need to stop for a while,” his healer countered.

Jaime turned, his eyes shooting daggers at him. “We’re not.”

But Qyburn had already signalled the group to a halt. “Your bandages need to be changed. It cannot wait,” he said, unmoved and unperturbed by Jaime’s intimidating gesture.

*She cannot wait,* Jaime thought, panic rising in his chest. But he thought it better to comply than to repeatedly oppose his companions. After all, he still had to get home in one piece, or however much was left of him now.

“Hurry up with it,” he said sourly, dismounting his transport. Impatience was brewing inside him, nevertheless, he decided to cooperate when Qyburn insisted he sit down on a rock and bear with him until he did his job. While the man deftly worked on him, Jaime couldn’t help but admire his skilled mastery.

“Why did the citadel take away your chains?” he asked after a bout of silence, half-interested and half-irritated with his unwanted interference in matters that were none of his concern.

Qyburn went on to indirectly explain his curiosity of the human body, his thirst and obsession to know and cure more, and in his quest for that, his indulgence in performing unspeakable experiments on living people, although he claimed he only touched those who were doomed to die.

“And did they survive?” Jaime asked slyly, “your unwitting subjects?”

“A few of them did,” he answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

“That’s nothing but a subtle way of saying that you’ve killed more than you’ve cured,” Jaime noted, his distrust towards the man increasing as did his admiration for his skills.

“How many men have you killed, my lord?”

Jaime was taken aback by the question. Which soldier kept count of such things? “I don’t know--”

“Fifty… hundred?” Qyburn prompted, when Jaime could come up with no precise number, “countless?”

“Countless has a nice ring to it,” Jaime agreed.
“And how many men have you saved?”

“Half a million,” said Jaime spontaneously, revealing the biggest truth of his life, “the entire population of King’s Landing.” That silenced the man who went about his task with neither questions nor any further intervention.

Once he had finished, they resumed their journey and within a couple of hours they were at the gates of the now-familiar ruins.

“Be quiet!” Jaime hissed at his companions, not wanting to attract attention when the men caused undue commotion, but he had nothing to worry about, for there was no one to hinder their entry, no guards, not anyone else. “What’s going on?” he asked, seeking out a sole passerby who seemed to be hurrying somewhere.

“I’m heading to the pit,” the man replied excitedly, pointing to a crowd some distance away from where they stood, “it’s a woman this time, they say, she’s supposed to fight the--”

His heart shifting from its designated spot and settled somewhere at his throat, Jaime didn’t wait to hear gruesome details of the rest of the so-called interesting sport. He had a good enough idea who the bait for this beast might be, praying with all his heart that he was on time to get her out of the quagmire he’d unwittingly pushed her into. He rode in her direction like a man on fire, without bothering to check if his escorts followed him or not, his anxiety and agitation mounting with every passing second. When he neared his destination, he realized he was at the right place, for the crowd that had gathered around the pit was nothing less than savage, cheering for the beast and jeering at the human that had to kill it or die.

Jumping off his horse, he scurried up the stairs that led to the vantage viewing point. Pushed the crowd aside, he got to the front. And there she was, wounded and blood-covered, clad in the same pink monstrosity, brandishing a sword--no a stick at the beast that was easily twice her size and ferocious enough to crush her skull in an instant.

“You gave her a wooden sword,” he cried out in exasperation when he spotted Locke a foot away, shouting along with the crowd.

“You’re back,” observed the thug, tearing his eyes off his entertainment, though least perturbed with Jaime’s unexpected arrival.

He grabbed Locke by his shirt. “I’ll pay her bloody ransom,” he growled in desperation, willing to give him anything to release her from the hellhole she was trapped in, “gold, sapphires, whatever you want. Just get her out of there!”

Locke pushed him away violently. “You want her, Kingslayer,” he sneered, glancing at his stump in satisfaction. “go get her.”

So he did.

What he did next was thoughtless, impulsive and stupid, all at the same time. Maybe he’d regret it later, maybe he wouldn’t live to regret it all, but for now, it felt right. Clutching the edge of the wall, he clambered on to it. Without a second thought, he leapt into the death-hole, landing behind the wench.

“What are you doing?” she cried out in disbelief, stealing a side-glance at him while trying not to take her eye off the beast.

“Something stupid,” he confessed, hoping he’d live to find his way out of this mess he’d landed
himself into, “now get behind me.”

“I will not,” she defiantly insisted, standing her ground while waving the tourney sword at her adversary who seemed not to care about it.

“Oh, for gods sakes, wench,” he muttered under his breath, exasperated with her mulish stubbornness. Grabbing her wrist, he pulled her bodily and yanked her out of the way, putting himself between her and the bear.

“Don’t be stupid--” she tried to advance, but he tripped her with his foot, sending her crashing to the ground, leaving her immobile for the time being.

And there he stood, his brain completely numb and his limbs frozen. The bear growled, observing him for a while, taking in the new intruder in its lair. And then, baring its teeth, it lunged at him. He stepped aside, dodging it successfully to his relief, but how long could he continue doing this? And what next? How were they going to escape this death sentence? The game went on for a few seconds, the beast growled, jumping at him, its sole intention being to crush the insect of a human that dared challenge it, while he slipped away, again and again and again.

He was beginning to tire, almost ready to give up, when help arrived in the form of an arrow that struck the beast’s paw from out of nowhere. Startled at the sudden attack, it paused, its attention diverted from Jaime as it looked around to seek the source of the weapon. And then another came, and another, until its huge mass was covered by a shower of arrows. Glancing up, Jaime found Steelshanks shooting down at it, while simultaneously yelling at them to get back up there. He seized Brienne’s hand and dragged her to the edge. “Go on,” he ordered her, bending down to give her a lift, waiting for the men to pull her to safety once she stepped on his back, up and away from the jaws of death.

“Come on,” she shrieked once she was back amongst the humans, forcing him to tear his eyes off the animal and climb. He began climbing, and damn it wasn’t easy having just one hand to hold on to! For every two steps he ascended, he slipped a bit, inching closer to death with every wasted moment as the bear jumped up at him, determined to maul him to pieces.

“Hold my legs,” he heard Brienne cry when he had made it about half way up. Bending down the edge of the wall, she held out her hand. Grabbing it gratefully, he pushed himself to climb, while someone else grabbed his stump, pulling him up.

Having finally made it, Jaime heaved a sigh of relief as he crumpled to the ground, clutching his chest for air.

“The bitch stays.” He looked up to see Locke towering over him, the man's spite and thirst for seeking revenge against the wench now doubled with Jaime’s unanticipated success.

“I’m taking her to King’s Landing,” Jaime asserted, scrambling to his feet, “unless you kill me first.”

Eager to take Jaime’s suggestion, Locke’s hand went to his sword, only to realize that it was the wrong move, for Steelshanks and his men pulled out their weapons immediately. “Lord Bolton’s orders are to get him to King’s Landing,” Steelshanks barked, “alive.”

“I’m sure Lord Bolton would--” Locke began.

But Jaime would have no more of his nonsense. “What is of more importance to Lord Bolton, I wonder? Getting his pet rat a reward, or making sure Tywin Lannister gets his son back alive?”

Locke’s jaw clenched, and then he swallowed his rage, releasing his hold on his sword.
“We’ll be going then,” Jaime said, turning to make sure Brienne was alright. They took a step ahead, when he stopped, remembering something. “Sorry about the sapphires,” he said, looking at Locke and gracing him with the nastiest smirk he could manage.

And then he walked away, the wench at his heel, followed by the rest of the entourage.

“Ser Jaime!”

He halted, a little surprised as he wasn't accustomed to her addressing him by his title, though his heart soared at the knowledge that she no longer thought of him as the Kingslayer. She might never know it, but the sound of his title, just the two words on her lips meant the world to him, giving him the comfort that there was someone other than his brother, albeit the only one in this world outside his family who believed he could rise above the worst act of his life and overcome the worst title he could ever have gained.

He turned around slowly, taking in her disheveled appearance, her clumsy clothes and her wounded and battered body. “Yes, Lady Brienne,” he replied, granting her the courtesy she deserved by virtue of her birth.

She flushed, perhaps just as surprised as him by his newly developed respect of her. “I owe you,” she said softly, “twice now--”

He shook his head. “You owe me nothing.”

“You were well away,” she spoke again as he was about to leave, “why come back?”

At a loss for words, and unnerved that this seemed to happen quite often off late when confronted by her questions, Jaime wondered what to tell her. An insult would probably be good, or perhaps some excuse, or maybe a snide remark, all of which, though at the tip of his tongue, wouldn’t manifest into actual words. Not today. “I dreamed of you,” he said simply, going for what was part of the truth for a change.

She bit back something that looked like a smile that had lost its way in transit, a reaction he’d far from expected from someone as serious as her. “A nightmare, I suppose,” she quipped, “I’d expect nothing less than that if I were the one to grace your sleep.”

“Quite right you are, wench,” he agreed, shuddering at the recollection and drawing a heavy breath to compose himself as they made their way to their horses.

“Tell me,” she asked him again when he was about to mount his steed, “why did you come back for me?”

“You once told me to try keeping a promise, remember?” he said, recalling that night when she’d tended to his injury. “That’s what I did, wench.”

She stared at him in blank surprise. “You made me no such promise.”

Jaime clicked his tongue in frustration, wondering if the woman really was as thick as she sounded. “I swore to get the Stark girls safely back to their mother,” he went on to explain, leaving out his real intention behind returning for her. “If you died, who would I entrust that responsibility with?”

Her forehead creased into a frown. “I already told you, if you feel obligated because of a few fake words uttered under pressure in a sept--”

That was a vow whether you like it or not, wench, one I swear to honour for as long as we’re
married, he suppressed the urge to tell her this truth, the true reason behind his agitated reaction to her capture.

“I told you it isn’t that,” he lied.

“Then why?” she said, still in disbelief. “You’ve tried to kill me many times. You’ve held me hostage, in chains, like an animal--” she frowned, her gaze fixed on him “--leaving me behind would’ve been good riddance for you. So why didn’t you?”

“Let’s just say chivalry had a hand in it, as did my inherent need to become the true knight I’ve always wished to be.” He tried to downplay his impulsive act of rescue, covering up the emotional turmoil he’d been through when her life had been at risk. “I may not be your husband for more than a moon or maybe two, but I’ll always strive to be a knight, and protecting the innocent is something I’ve been charged with--”

“You’ve never perceived me as an innocent before, not when I was a prisoner,” she countered, subtly reminding him of the atrocities he’d subjected her to over the past few days.

“I did what I felt was right then, and I’m doing the right thing now,” he admitted, “And in a way, I’ve got my comeuppance,” he said ruefully, glancing down at the hand that wasn’t there, “we’re both prisoners now. Hells, I’m worse than one!”

To that, she seemed to have no fitting retort. “Jumping into that pit was stupid,” she admonished him, her voice abnormally low.

He allowed himself a smile as he looked at her. “You were the one who taught me that courage is of utmost value for a true knight--”

“Courage doesn’t mean taking stupid decisions,” she scolded him again with--was that concern he saw in her eyes? “You ought to have consulted your brain before you jumped in like that.”

“Not all decisions are arrived at in concurrence with the brain, my lady,” he admitted, immediately regretting the stupidity of not sparing a thought to what he was saying.

Her eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

“Whatever you want it to mean,” he decided to be vague, breaking into a smile.

When she returned his smile, he couldn’t help noticing that it did brighten up her usually stoic and manly features. “Ah, so you can smile, wench,” he teased, his grin broadening. “Still a maiden, then?” he asked, worried if her captors had manhandled her.

The smile faded, replaced by a faint blush to her cheeks as she felt silent.

“Good,” he quipped, taking her silence as an affirmation for the positive, “I only rescue maidens.”

At this remark, her blush deepened. “We must go,” she said evasively, turning to mount her horse, glad for a chance to look away from him.
They rode on without incident, leaving Brienne to reflect on the happenings of the last few hours. She marvelled her fate, particularly Jaime’s unbelievably heroic arrival to save her from what was meant to be a slow, torturous, but sure death. Not to mention the horror she’d faced at the hands of Locke and his men prior to that. Once Jaime had left, they’d tried to rape her again, repeatedly attempting to force themselves on her, but somehow, thankfully with the blessings of the Seven and the incredible will power and resistance that surged in her when faced with the threat of giving up her honour to filthy scum such as these, she was able to fight them, to resist them until they got wary of the struggle they had to put up and let her be, deciding that fucking a woman this ugly wasn’t worth the effort they had to put in.

Instead, they decided on entertainment of a different sort, to have her fight a bear and watch her die. After all, what better fate for a woman who wouldn’t give herself to them? This was, of course, not before subjecting her to a variety of injuries in places she’d dare not mention in public. Not just physical, they’d inflicted her with emotional scars, opening up wounds of her past when men would bet against each other just to get into bed with her.

Trusting men with her life and honour was going to be even more difficult now. But there were men, and there was Jaime Lannister, a man she’d sworn to distrust, determined to hate, the man who’d shown her such kindness and chivalry she’d never expected of him, leaving her confused and wondering if her judgement of people and stubborn prejudice against some of them was skewed after all.

“You look disturbed,” Jaime’s voice wafted from beside her, “what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she lied, trying to mask the nasty, nightmarish memories of her experience with what she assumed was an expression of calm.

“Something’s not right,” he said suspiciously, slowing down and peering into her eyes for signs of the truth. “You don’t sound normal, you don’t sound--” he seemed to rack his brains for the right word “--wenchy,” he finished.

“Let’s just keep going,” she said, yanking at the reins and steering the horse faster. But no sooner had she gone a few feet, than a searing pain burned through her neck, forcing her to come to a grinding halt. She closed her eyes, sweating, the whole of her neck and chest on fire.

“Halt,” Jaime shouted at once.

“No, keep going, we don’t have to stop,” she put up a feeble resistance embarrassed by the attention she was drawing. It was too late, he was off his horse and by her side.

“That looks awful,” he gasped, reaching out to touch her neck, but she recoiled.

“It’s nothing,” she waved him off, “just a scratch.”

Jaime regarded her for a second, but he didn’t insist beyond that, nor did he try to touch her again. “Qyburn can decide if it’s just a scratch,” he said in a tone that clearly meant he’d entertain no resistance, holding out his hand to help her alight.

“I can manage,” she said weakly, avoiding his hand and attempting to get down by herself. But try as
she might, she found it next to impossible to move her left arm. When she tried to get off, she tripped and was about to lose her balance and topple off the animal, but Jaime was quick to act, his arm around her waist, holding her steady, as his hand held hers.

“Let me help,” he offered, gently assisting her to the ground.

“We cannot stop,” came Steelshanks’ enraged objection when Jaime walked her to a nearby rock. “Lord Bolton’s orders for me were to go straight to King’s Landing and collect his reward on his behalf.” He threw Jaime a dirty look. “I’ve already flouted his instructions once, you aren’t going to make me do it again.”

Jaime played the old Lannister trick he’d once tried on her. “When we get back to King’s Landing, how about I tell my father that this man—” he gestured towards Steelshanks “—chopped my hand off—”

“I didn’t—” Steelshanks began an angry protest.

“Or I could tell him that this man saved my life,” Jaime went on calmly, using the bargaining tactics that were ingrained in his blood. “So why don’t you make sure I get what I want while I assure you a handsome reward once I’m home?”

He waited, watching the man’s face for a reaction. The storm in those eyes gradually ebbed, a selfish calm at the prospect of a reward replacing it, leading to a reluctant ghost of a smile on the man’s face. “Very well, then,” he conceded.

The maester, Qyburn, began cleaning her wounds with Jaime standing by his side, watching him like a hawk. “How bad is it?” he inquired of the old man.

“Nothing my medicine, a dose of milk of the poppy and a good night’s sleep won’t alleviate,” he said, once he’d assessed the extent of the damage.

“She needs a comfortable bed,” Jaime said thoughtfully.

“That would certainly help the healing process,” Qyburn agreed, “there’s an inn just around the corner. It’s almost dusk, we could stay the night—”

“We don’t have to,” Brienne protested despite her pain, “we can set up camp right here—”

“You are to be comfortable tonight,” Jaime cut her, his tone bearing a sense of finality that this was the end of their argument. “And you’re travelling with me,” he said, taking her arm to lead her to his horse when they got up to resume their journey.

“I’m no child, I can—”

“I can’t risk having you fall off and break your neck,” he said strictly, “so why don’t you leave aside your stubborn self and listen to sense for a change?”

To her surprise, she found herself obeying him. They had ridden a horse together before, but this was different, he was now different. No longer the Kingslayer who vexed her, the man whose arms were around her was not the man she hated anymore. She knew not what to make of her changed feelings towards him. Respect, she felt for him, and trust - belief and trust in his honour and his word, and guilt that he had to lose a vital part of himself for her sake, but apart from all that, there was something else, something she couldn’t put her finger on, something she couldn’t name.

“Lean on me if you feel weak.” His voice buzzed in her ear like a soothing drink, filling her with a
comfortable warmth, a feeling so safe and secure unlike anything she’d ever felt before.

“I--” she stuttered, taken aback by his offer, and as always affected by his closeness and his touch, “I’m quite alright.” She straightened at once, ensuring there was a decent gap between their bodies.

“Oh, don’t shy away from me, my lady,” he teased, his usual cocky self back after a rare bout of decency and chivalry, “I’m your husband. I’d sworn to protect you, remember? How can I let you--”

“You still are as insufferable as you’ve ever been,” she said with a sigh, knowing that he did and would always think of her as the ugly wench he’d been compelled to marry to escape death. “I’d appreciate it if you could stop making our marriage sound like a joke--”

“But it is one, is it not?” he said, “A joke, a sham, a farce, call it whatever you like. Worry not, for it isn’t going to last very long. I’m planning to get it annulled as soon as we reach.”

“I’d very much welcome that,” she said, hoping to get away from this man as soon as she could. Her loathing for him long gone, his company was beginning to create very different, highly inexplicable problems for her.

“Ah, here we are at last!” he exclaimed, drawing her attention to the old building at a distance.

Not many minutes later, she found herself, yet again, sharing a room with Jaime. “We could’ve had separate rooms,” she complained as Jaime settled their bag in a corner.

“Our gold was confiscated, and these men don’t have the money for overheads,” he explained, a frown marring his handsome features. “What’s the matter, wench? I thought you’d trust me by now, that I’m not the man to play around with a woman’s honour--”

“It’s not that,” she said hastily, worried that she’d offended him, “It’s just that I--” she hesitated.

“Yes?”

*I’m worried that your presence might have adverse effects on my mind.*

“Nothing,” she said, deciding not to object about it anymore.

Jaime let it be, thankfully not pressing her anymore, but instead looked her up and down, his eyes lingering on her chest. “What?” she snapped, a shiver running through her spine as she followed his gaze.

“Maybe you ought to get out of that dress,” he said, his eyes still fixed where they were.

It was only after she gave him a shocked, scandalous look that he shook himself to senses, forcing his eyes to meet hers instead of letting them wander where they had no right to be. “I—I didn’t mean it the way you thought I did,” he explained himself hurriedly, reddening, “I just felt you might be more comfortable out of this torn, filthy gown, that you’d prefer wearing some of your normal clothes again.”

A part of her craved for a bath and clean clothes, but her tired and battered body refused to cooperate, yearning for a good night’s sleep more than anything else. “I don’t think I want to,” she decided, sinking into the left half of the bed, allowing herself to savour the comfort and peace it held after hours of torture and pain. More than that, she didn’t want to strip in his presence, partly because the thought of baring it all for his eyes to see made her blush to the roots of her hair, and mostly because she was uncomfortable with the prospect that he might discover the wounds her assailants had inflicted on her.
“I’ll get you something to eat,” Jaime offered.

“I’m not hungry,” she refused, her eyes growing heavier by the second.

He said nothing, but rummaged in their saddle bag, plucking out a vial after a bit of searching. “Here,” he said, striding to her bedside and holding the vial to her lips, “Qyburn said you’d need this.” Once he’d poured a few drops of the milk of the poppy into her mouth, she shut her eyes, allowing sleep to take over and time to heal her bruised body and mind.

“If you don’t spread your legs of your own accord, I’ll have to pry them open, bitch,” Locke snarled, his filthy hands snaking up her legs, dangerously close to where he’d been wanting to put them.

“Stay away,” she spat, aiming a violent kick to his teeth and successfully knocking him over.

At once, she felt a stinging hand to her face, tasting blood as the slap had cut her lip, leaving it broken and bleeding. She turned to see who her assailant was, but she was forced down, shoulders and limbs pinned to the ground.

“Your beloved lover is not here to save you this time,” said another man who pushed her dress up, sliding the tip of his knife across her inner thigh and drawing a thin stream of blood.

“Hurt me as much as you want,” she barked, refusing to yield to these cunts, “I’m not going to let you take what doesn’t belong to you.”

“Who does it belong to then?” Locke hissed. “The Kingslayer, I’m sure, but it’s a pity he ain’t here to save your ass today.”

“You don’t give in,” said the man with the knife again, his blade digging deeper into her skin, “I’m going to shove this in places you’ve never imagined--”

“Get the hell off me!” she screamed, kicking and flailing to fend them off, only to find thin air when she opened her eyes.

“Calm down, Brienne,” said a familiar, soothing voice in her ear as strong arms pulled her closer. “I--” She struggled, fighting to get away from his grasp.

“Don’t worry,” he said comfortably, “it’s me, Jaime.”

Reality finally dawned on her. She was in an inn. With Jaime. Locke and the men who had assaulted her were miles away, they’d never harm her again.

“You seem to have been through a nightmare,” he said, tightening his hold around her.

She nodded wordlessly, panting and sweating. So terrified she’d been inside her dream that some of the horror seemed to have seeped into reality, leaving her shaking in his arms. “L--Locke,” she stammered, unable to get a word beyond that, her throat dry with horror combined with relief that this was all just a dream.

Jaime drew away on hearing the name. “What did he do, Brienne?” he asked, his emerald eyes shining with rage.

“N--nothing,” she lied, ashamed at her vulnerability and such a blatant display of her feminine insecurity in front of him.
But Jaime wasn’t that easily convinced. “Did they--” he pressed his lips, his face contorted with fury as he tried to read her still terrified expression “--did they force themselves on you?”

“They tried to, but I didn’t let them,” she told him the condensed version of the truth, not wanting to get into uncomfortable details about the injuries Locke and his assailants had inflicted upon her.

Jaime put his good arm around her shoulder and pulled her close again. “You’re safe now, you’re with me,” he whispered softly in her ear, “you can sleep peacefully.”

Brienne then did what she’d never imagined she’d ever do, particularly where this man was concerned. Resting her head on his shoulder, she allowed herself the safety and comfort of his presence around her and drifted off to sleep, inhaling his familiar scent and basking in the reassuring feel of his body against hers, trusting him enough to know that he wouldn’t abandon her to the darkness of her nightmares for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

I’d like to take this moment to thank you all for the kudos and the lovely encouraging comments :) I love you all and you’ve been a great motivation for me to keep writing!
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Jaime battles his change of heart towards his "wife", while Brienne continues to suppress and downplay the effects of her abuse at the hands of the Boltons, trying her best to hide her troubled state from Jaime.

Morning had dawned on them sooner than Jaime had expected, or so it probably seemed to him because he’d woken up with a headache and blurry eyes. His groggy state could be attributed to lack of sleep, but what would he appropriate his sleeplessness to? Concern for the peace of mind of the woman who lay fast asleep in his arms, snoring softly on his chest? Worry and rage that she’d almost been raped, and perhaps assaulted? Or was it some unnamed feeling lurking deep within the remote crevices of his heart, or perhaps disgust that she’d been touched by men as filthy as the foulest scum he’d had the misfortune to come upon?

Her uncharacteristic display of vulnerability, and to a certain extent, the raw exposure of her femininity last night had hit him like a bolt out of nowhere, leaving him incapable of an apt reaction when he’d first come upon her suffering. A second glance at her horror-struck face and he’d known what to do, her woeful screams melted his heart making sure he’d succumbed, and he instantly volunteered to stay by her side, to do what it took to ease her suffering. Nightmares, anyone was susceptible to, but what he hadn’t anticipated was her immediate readiness to accept his offer of company, for she was the last person who would resort to seeking comfort in the arms of a man like him in even the most hopeless of situations.

He’d been no less surprised with himself, for never before had he shown such compassion towards a fellow human who wasn’t his family. Even within his family, Tyrion, perhaps, was the only recipient of his undiluted affection. Rarely had he done something akin to this for even someone as intimate with him as Cersei, he realized, scanning his memory for the last time he’d held his dear sister like he held Brienne. The only woman who mattered to him, once she’d been married to Robert, Cersei had never turned to him for such pure and innocent acts of love. Whenever he was in her chambers, or she in his, all they ever got were a precious few minutes, a quick fuck the only thing they could manage within those constraints, and that too fully dressed and full of tension for fear of someone walking in on them. Not once had he slept by her side all night like a man with his woman. Not once had he held her like this, close to his chest, watching her sleep blissfully, knowing that he was the reason for her tranquility and sense of security.

The wench stirred in her sleep, immediately attracting his attention, ousting all thoughts of Cersei from his mind. Last night was perhaps the first time he’d seen her tear down the impregnable wall of defence around her that kept anyone and everyone at bay, and it might probably be the last. Maybe she trusted him enough to allow him to breach her invisible barrier, or maybe it was just her helplessness, a reflexive reaction of her troubled sub-conscious that had driven her into his arms. Though he hoped it to be the former, he could never know unless he got to know her better, and having been with the wench long enough to gauge her, he was fairly sure that she’d be back to normal when she woke, reverting to her usual distant and formal demeanour the moment she was back to her senses.

He was stiff all over and his stump ached from holding her tight, but not once did he regret his
actions. He’d do it again, if need be, and if she wished it of him. One look at her innocent face and the rhythmic movement of her head that perfectly coincided with his heaving chest, he had not the heart to push her away or wake her up. So all he did was watch her sleep with a growing feeling of quiet contentment that he’d provided someone with comfort good enough to soothe them to peace. His heart soared when she snuggled closer, while his cock stirred without warning when her arm went around his waist and her leg over his, their limbs intertwined and her knee choosing to come to rest at a precarious position, firmly wedging itself between his legs. It was a strange combination of satisfaction and discomfort within him, either emotion inseparable from the other.

He didn’t have to wait much longer for her to wake. Her eyelids fluttered open, uncovering the astonishing blue eyes that, to his annoyance, he’d become such an ardent admirer of these days.

“Ser Jaime!”

Pink-faced and flustered upon finding herself in the delicate position that was characteristic of intimate lovers, Brienne untangled herself from him and hastily sat up, pulling her gown closer, as always, in a pathetically useless attempt to cover her modest breasts. For a fleeting instant, his mind flew to the unforgettable moment when she’d shot to her feet in the bath, naked but hardly vulnerable, unleashing all the glory and fury within her, with no inhibitions to drag her back and absolutely unfazed when he’d stared at her. She had stood before him for nearly a full minute, providing him with a vision that was, to his dismay, still etched in his mind’s eye, vivid and undisplaced. And gaped at her he had, like a green squire of ten and six, like a lad who’d never seen a naked woman before, all his pent-up imaginations of what she’d look like under her clothes coming to life in those precious few seconds.

“Lady Brienne,” he found his tongue after long, greeting her in the same vein, aching to know if the blush that adorned her cheeks was out of embarrassment from last night or because of waking up in his arms.

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean to be a nuisance,” she mumbled, swallowing half the words as she refused to meet his eyes.

“It was no trouble at all,” Jaime found himself saying.

“Did you--” she hesitated, prodding the threads on the bedspread as she spoke, “--did you stay up all night on my account?”

“Not all night,” he replied, trying to downplay his concern for her, “just for some part of the night.” He found his tongue thickening, and for one of the rarest moments in his life, he didn’t know what to say, or how to deal with his rapidly diminishing ill-feeling for the woman in front of him. “Well, I did spend most of the night awake,” he blurted out the truth, “because I wanted to ensure that you’re at ease.”

She peered into his eyes, the blue pools shining with gratitude. “I appreciate your gesture. Thank you.”

Jaime flashed her a grin, her girlish discomfort stirring something dormant inside him. “You once said you’d rather die than snuggle up to me,” he teased, “remember?”

“I did, but that was then,” she quietly agreed, returning to fiddling with the sheet again. “My apologies, I had no intention of inconveniencing you or disrupting your sleep.”

“It was barely an inconvenience,” he reiterated. “It’s not that I’m going to spend all my life with you. It’s only until we reach King’s Landing, we’ll soon part ways and you’ll be rid of me and me of"
you.” He paused, sparing a thought for this eventuality, for they had but a few more days together until their memorable and eventful journey came to an end. “Until then, you’re my wife--”

“Oh, please don’t do that again,” she said wearily, her eyes leaping to meet his again, “we both know--”

“--that it’s not going to last long,” he finished her thoughts. “But as long as it does--”

She let out a dry laugh. “I can’t believe I was your hostage not long ago.”

“You still are, in a way,” he said thoughtfully. “Marriage to me is an unfavourable bond for you, isn’t it?”

“I did say that because I felt so then, because being married to you was nothing short of--” She broke off abruptly.

He was suddenly overcome with an irresistible urge to jest with her. “The way you clung to me last night, I’m getting the feeling that you’re beginning to accept me as your husband.”

“Only in your dreams, Ser Jaime,” she snapped, irked by his comment, “After all you’ve done for me, I’ve begun to respect you and hold you in high regard. But if you think I’m attracted to you--”

“You may not realize it now, but give it some time, my lady,” he continued, his tone taking on a wicked edge as he enjoyed her reddening face, “a few more days in my company, and I don’t suppose you’ll be able to resist me--”

“It doesn’t matter how many days I spend with you,” she said, her blush deepening. “I’m immune to your handsome looks.”

He was quick to spot the important bit hidden in her admonishment of him and the denial of his claims. “So you do think I’m handsome,” he remarked, catching her unawares.

“I--” she stuttered, biting her lip. “It doesn’t matter what I think. I only concurred with the world’s opinion of you,” she said in meek defence of her accidental confession. She jumped off the bed with such haste that he’d never seen before. “Now if you would excuse me, I need to--”

Jaime promptly followed suit, darting around the bed to her side. He grabbed her wrist before she could escape into the bath. “I don’t care what the world thinks about me, Brienne,” he whispered, remembering the words of wisdom his father had once drilled into his head. “I want to know what you think of me,” he asked her before he could stop himself, alarmed that he was beginning to care about her views more than necessary, flouting his father’s principles.

“I hope and I believe that you will keep your promise to me.” She jerked her hand free of his grasp. Frustrated that this wasn’t a direct answer to his question, he was about to probe further, but was left with no chance nor an open window to continue the conversation.

“If you could--” she gestured to him to turn around as she began unlacing her dress “--I need a bath.” This was an indirect indication for him to piss off, a hint to him that she wasn’t interested in pursuing the matter anymore.

Paying no heed to her words, he stared at her blatantly when she had her back to him, struggling to get the dress off once she’d undone the laces on the front. “Let me,” he offered, springing up behind her at once, his hand on her arm and his stump brushing against her waist.

She didn’t pull away, but shivered at his touch and Jaime instantly knew why. “I’m not Locke,” he
reminded her softly, leaning closer, his face barely inches away from her neck.

“I know.” She let out another shudder when he exhaled on her bare skin, but then she relaxed, permitting him to invade her personal space, offering no resistance as she began helping him loosen her clothing. Sliding the garment off her shoulder, he let his fingers kiss the smooth skin of her back, allowing himself the luxury of finding out what she felt like. He had vague memories of her touch from the bath, but to experience it when in better health and in full consciousness was vastly different, something, despite himself and his unwillingness to admit to himself, he’d very much been looking forward to.

“Tell me, Brienne,” he began, letting his hand linger on her skin for as long as what he was doing warranted him to, “did Locke or his men touch you inappropriately?”

Her deep breath, the immediate change in her posture - the way she straightened her shoulders and balled her fingers into a fist was good enough an answer for him, his blood boiling as he pictured those bastards trying to violate her. Only now did it occur to him that her dress which was ripped in places wasn’t the result of the bear trying to maul her, it was these beasts that called themselves humans who had done this to her, the savages for whom a woman in captivity was a toy to play with, a means to satisfy their lust and their needs of the flesh.

“Did they do this to you?” he pressed further, examining the torn patches as he pulled the dress off her and handed it to her.

“It’s only a dress,” she said, quickly wrapping the discarded garment around her to cover her modesty. “I didn’t let them go any further--”

“You’re a warrior and fought them off physically,” he surmised, “but they left you with scars, wounds deep inside, in your mind and beyond, ones that are severe enough to torment you in your sleep.” When she neither confirmed nor refuted his claim, he went on. “I’ll avenge this insult you’ve been through, wench,” he resolved to himself, gritting his teeth, “when we get back, I’ll make sure Locke and his cunts are dealt with a punishment severe enough to ensure that they’d never touch a helpless woman again,” he seethed, a mental image of those men being deprived of their cocks greatly appeasing his anger.

“There will be no need for that,” she countered him softly, but firmly. “You came back to save me, and that’s more than enough. I’m with you, away from dishonour and death and on my way to fulfilling my oath. I couldn't ask for and I don’t wish for anything more than that. What you’ve done is far more than--”

“I did what was expected of me. I had sworn a vow to protect you,” he spilled out the contents of his mind without thinking nor filtering what he was saying.

She stiffened again. “What vow?”

“When I married you--”

She shrugged him off and stepped away, putting a considerable distance between them. “Please do not jest, Ser Jaime, because we both know what there is between us,” she said, her stormy eyes threatening to burn him as she turned to confront him. “By way of our conflicting loyalties, we’re on opposite sides, and that’s where we’ll always be. No matter how hard we try to help each other, everything’s going to be different as soon as we set foot in King’s Landing. You’ll be back in your sister’s arms, while I wish for nothing more than the girls to be handed to me. I’ll be on my way once you’ve obliged me with that, never to meet you again.”
Taken aback by her unexpected outburst and hurt by her curt dismissal of his sincere intent to help, Jaime resorted to the only thing he was good at, the only thing that would prevent him from dwelling too much on his growing attachment to the woman he’d resolved to despise. “Having lived with me all these weeks, I thought you’d know me well by now. I think you’d agree that provoking each other to anger is a good way of spending our time together,” he said brusquely, masking his true feelings with an expertly built facade of arrogance and sarcasm. “And you’re right,” he lied, “I was merely jesting, and I sincerely hope that one day you’d learn to take a joke as one ought to be taken.”

“Maybe I should heed your advice right away,” she answered him coldly. “I should be wiser, taking nothing that you say seriously, neither your mockery nor the insults you so liberally shower me with.”

Saying no more than that, Brienne gathered the dress and herself and disappeared into the bath, slamming the door on his face, leaving him disturbed and dismayed with the way their exchange had turned out in the end.

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Jaime caught hold of Qyburn’s arm when they crossed paths on the staircase. “Have you seen Brienne anywhere?”

“I thought she was with you,” said the old measter, his ever curious eyes prodding Jaime in an attempt to know what was amiss.

“I left the room a while after she abruptly walked away,” Jaime said, recalling the way she’d stormed away soon after her bath, regretting with every passing minute his mistake of leaving the injured woman alone, “and when I returned, she wasn’t in the room, nor is she downstairs.”

“She’ll be back, my lord,” Qyburn reassured him in his soothing fatherly tone. “The lady is quite capable of taking care of herself. Now why don’t we go back to your room so that I can take a look at your hand.”

His mind blank and his brain refusing to work, Jaime followed the old man, his thoughts constantly with the wench, the worry that she might come to some harm eating him every single second. The healer appeared to have read his mind. “We can send one of the men to look for her,” he suggested as he wrapped his stump with a fresh piece of cloth.

“No,” Jaime vehemently disagreed, “I don’t trust them. They’re only obliged to get me safely back home. I shudder to think how they might react if they happen to corner her alone. Weak and vulnerable that she is, I don’t think she’d stand a chance if they tried--” he stopped, the image of her torn gown looming large in front of him. “I’ll search for her myself,” he decided, not wanting to think what awful fate lay in store for her, every minute he delayed increasing the possibility and probability of his worst fears coming true.

And that was what he did. He spent what was left of the morning and a good part of the afternoon looking for her in and around the inn. Only when he checked the stables did he realize that her horse was missing. Why had she ridden away alone? Where would she have gone? And why would she go anywhere without him? Had she lied to him when she’d told him that she believed in his word? Brienne of Tarth was many things - mulishly stubborn, incorrigibly adamant, outrageously honourable and annoyingly righteous, but a liar she was not, nor was she one to go back on her word. The more he thought about it, the more he felt that this was more of an impulsive exit. Having been in his captivity for weeks, she’d barely had the privilege to stretch her limbs, and today, having been mocked at yet again might have been the last bit of provocation for her.
She’s not going anywhere without me, he decided, forcing himself to calm down and wait for her, betrayal is not a quality she’s endowed with.

Having spent all day alone and in no mood for company, Jaime sat by himself at one of the corner tables at the inn as dusk set in, hoping no one would disturb the peaceful solitude he so desperately sought. But peace lay in one’s mind and not in the surroundings they chose to seclude themselves in, and Jaime’s mind was nothing short of turbulent after the morning scene and Brienne’s unannounced departure, with peace running as far away from him as it could.

But he still sat there, sipping his ale, wanting to see no one nor speak to anyone.

“Ser Jaime!"

No one, but one, for she’s the one I’ve been waiting for...

“Lady Brienne.” He sprang to his feet at once, the unexpected burst of chivalry in him at the mere sound of her voice taking him by surprise. “I--” he began, speechless beyond that, wondering what to say next after their uncomfortable last conversation.

“May I--” She eyed the empty second chair at the table.

“When have you ever sought my permission for anything?” he remarked, gesturing to the chair and inviting her to join him. “And would it be too much to ask where you’ve been all day, my lady?”

She sat down, her posture stiff and guarded, the tension between them mounting by the second. “I was out visiting the nearby village.”

“Without telling me?” he accused her, the pent up rage in him surfacing at her sudden appearance. Her eyes pierced his, firm and defiant. “I didn’t find it necessary.”

“The hell you didn’t,” he roared, pounding his fist on the table.

Brienne’s eyes widened at his aggression. “I’m no longer your captive--”

“You aren’t,” he yelled, “but I’m still responsible for you.”

“Gods, if it’s the same we’re married nonsense again, I’m not interested in listening,” she muttered irritably, getting to her feet.

“Sit down, Brienne, and hear me out,” he bellowed at her. “Do you even realize what dangers lie out there for an unarmed, wounded woman? I’ve spent all day looking for you, not because you were my captive or because we’re married or because we have a deal between us. I did it because--” I’ve been worried to death about you, he wanted to say, but bit back his words, because the wench would most likely think he was exaggerating, or worse still, mocking her.

“You provoked me into leaving,” she snapped, as enraged as him when she took her seat. “Had you not picked up an argument without reason, I wouldn’t have left without informing you.”

A long spell of silence ensued with both of them glaring at each other across the table, each daring the other to speak first.

“It won’t happen again--” they both chimed in unison once they’d calmed down.

What followed was an uneasy attempt at a watery smile from her, which he returned, and that fortunately seemed to dissipate some of the tension around them.
“Your scathing words aren’t going to affect me anymore,” she told him in an oddly resigned tone, “for you and I have just a few more days together. What’s the point in taking offence to something that’s going to be non-existent very soon?”

“I’m glad to hear that, wench,” he managed, relieved and alarmed at the same time that she had decided to make peace with his biting sarcasm.

“I can’t believe you’re still calling me wench. I have a name--”

“I like calling you wench,” he confessed, grinning widely, “it suits you.”

She pulled a face, but refrained from complaining.

“You just said that my remarks wouldn’t bother you anymore,” he reminded her carefully, not wanting to hurt her whilst at the same time reluctant to unveil the softer side of him for her to see, “then why should this--”

“It’s quite alright,” she interrupted him dismissively, her tone indifferent and uncaring, “call me whatever you want.”

So what he thought of her didn’t matter to her anymore! “That’s--” he halted, wondering how best he could sound cheerful with her decision “--some fruitful self-introspection you’ve had today and the best decision you’ve made in days.”

She was quiet after that, the awkwardness between them making its ominous presence felt again.

“Tell me about your family,” Jaime inquired in an attempt to switch to something that could make for an amicable discussion. The last thing he wanted to do was to irk her with some unintentionally snide remark.

“You know everything about me,” she said stiffly, “there’s nothing more to that.”

“I know that you’re your father’s only surviving child, and that you were betrothed thrice,” he revealed, hoping she’d tell him more about her three failed attempts at marriage. For some strangely unfathomable reason, his mind was fighting an internal battle, one between his curiosity to know more about her and his desperate efforts to stop being inquisitive and return to his animosity towards her, a feeling which once flowed through him effortlessly, despite it now miserably failing him.

She let out a soft sigh. “The first one died before I could meet him, and the second was a newly knighted Ser Ronnet Connington, and he--” she bit her lip in embarrassment, gloom paling the beauty of those startlingly blue eyes “--he took one look at me and called off the alliance.”

“His loss, the insufferable cunt that he’s been to you, you don’t deserve scum like him,” Jaime muttered under his breath, harbouring nothing but spite for this unknown Connington.

“Sorry, I didn’t quite hear that,” she urged him to repeat, leaning towards him.

His ears grew warm at realization that he’d voiced his thoughts aloud. “I was saying that a married man has the right to know more about his wife,” he said in a pathetic attempt to cover up his lack of discretion.

She eyed him in exasperation. “This is now beginning to get tiring. Do you really want to know about me, or are you just flinging these questions with an idea of hitting me with a freshly concocted barrage of taunts?”
Jaime regretted his joke at once. “I am capable of being serious at times, and this happens to be one of those rare moments, so yes, I sincerely wish to know.” he admitted, deep down, still confused about his true intent. “Pray, do continue, my lady.”

A shadow clouded her homely face as she carried on with her tale. “The third was a man as old as my father.”

“And did he reject you as well?” He found his curiosity mounting.

Her face brightening at once, the wench smiled another of those rare, precious smiles in a display of what could be nothing but satisfaction at how she’d dealt with the third nuisance. “I challenged him to a fight,” she told him with relish, “promised my father that I’d wed him if he defeated me in combat.”

Jaime chortled at the mental image of the wench towering over a wizened old man who crouched in front of her, begging for mercy as her blade pressed into his neck. “I don’t think I need to ask you about the outcome.”

Her smile widened to a grin. “Broken bones,” she revealed gleefully, “three in all. And a broken old man. And best of all, a broken betrothal.” Her smile abruptly fading, she sighed. “Brienne the Beauty, they used to call me.” Jaime could sense the bitterness and pain in her voice when she mentioned this. “No man in his right senses would ever wed me,” she said ruefully, gazing into the distance.

“I wed you,” he blurted out before he could stop himself, “and you do know that I was very much in my senses when it happened.”

“I meant a real wedding, Ser Jaime, not the game we’ve both been compelled to play,” she went on, this time unfazed by his remark, dismissing it as yet another of his jokes. “I’m glad neither of them were to be my future, for none of them were anything like the image of the husband I had in my maiden fantasies.”

“Am I?” he whispered, leaning forward and looking deeply into her eyes, his fingers inching closer and itching to make contact with her hand that rested on the table.

Caught by his gaze, she straightened, drawing in a sharp breath. “What do you mean?” her tone was unnaturally soft and she blinked about a million times, dumbstruck by his unexpected question.

“Am I the husband of your dreams?” he asked again, half-hoping she’d take it as another of his awful attempts at a joke and bite his head off, while half-wishing that she’d answer him truthfully, for a corner of his heart wished to know if a man like him was any good for a woman as righteous as her.

She deflected him deftly yet again. “How does it matter?”

“It doesn’t,” he agreed, “but there’s one thing to our marriage that you must realize, wench,” he said, a slow smile spreading across his face as he realized it. “Before I wed you, I did fulfil your condition. I beat you in combat.”

Her face glowed brighter than the rays of the setting sun. “That wasn’t a fair fight.”

“Of course it wasn’t, I was weak and malnourished whilst you were in full strength and armoured,” he said, bouncing the argument back to her. “If I weren’t Jaime Lannister and if you didn’t hate me as much as you do--”
“I don’t--” she blurted out, interrupting his flurry of words.

“You don’t--what?”

“Nothing,” she muttered, suddenly deciding that her fingernails were more interesting to look at than him.

“If I weren’t a Lannister and you weren’t pledged to the Starks, and if it weren’t for fate to have had us cross paths at the unfavourable junction where we first met,” he went on, “you’d have considered me as worthy a match as any other man and not regretted this marriage as much as you do today--”

“I almost forgot the real reason I came to meet you,” she cut in again in an obvious attempt to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“Which is?” he prompted, unwilling to push her on anything she was uncomfortable talking about.

“We should leave at once,” she insisted, uncharacteristically restless all of a sudden.

Jaime decided to put his foot down, to fight her tiresome determination. “We aren’t leaving until you’re fit enough to travel.”

“I’ve ridden all day and I’m fit enough to travel.” She was adamant, her homely face as stubborn as ever, her expression that of someone who wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“It’s dark,” said Jaime, thankful for an excuse to enforce another night’s rest on her, “Qyburn can examine you tomorrow morning, and if you’re fit enough, we can resume our journey.” He decided to change the subject before she had a chance to object or counter his decision. “Now how about some supper before we retire for the night?”

After a thoughtful minute, she relented and agreed to dine with him. Not much later, their food arrived and they began eating in silence, and Jaime couldn’t help stealing covert glances at her, wondering if… if the wench still disapproved of him, the question burning him ever since he’d poured his heart out to her at Harrenhal.

Does she resent me even now?

The thought crossed his mind and he studied her closely as she sipped spoonfuls of her soup. She had made it clear that she respected him and believed in him, and while that didn’t confirm the complete erasure of her loathing for him, it did give him some hope that the extreme feeling of dislike in her had indeed reduced considerably, even if it may not have completely disappeared.

She caught him staring and looked up from her bowl. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing,” he murmured, returning to the contents of his plate. He looked up again. “Brienne, I--”

Their exclusive company of each other came to an end and Jaime was unable to ask her the question he was dying to seek the answer to. “My lord,” came their interruption in the form of Qyburn, “there’s news downstairs--” the man’s expression was sombre “--I’m afraid it isn’t pleasant, particularly for the lady,” he warned, his eyes darting towards Brienne who stood up at once, her large eyes full of apprehension.

“What is it?” she urged impatiently.

“Lady Catelyn Stark no longer lives,” he broke the news to her gently, “as does her son, the King in the North and his wife--”
The wench looked aghast. “How did this happen?” she croaked as if she’d lost the ability to speak.

“They were murdered at Edmure Tully’s wedding. They now call it the Red Wedding.”

“Murdered by whom?” Jaime asked, wondering who could’ve committed an act as cowardly as killing unarmed guests at a wedding.

“The Freys and Roose Bolton.” Qyburn suddenly looked uncomfortable, unable to look Jaime in the eye. “I regret to inform you that they acted on your father’s instructions, Ser Jaime.”

Brienne’s face was white as a sheet when she glanced at him. “Excuse me, I need a moment,” she managed, her voice quivering.

And then she was gone, without sparing Jaime a second look nor waiting to hear from him. Qyburn turned to him once she’d left. “You must be careful of her, my lord,” he warned, “now that your father has acted against the Starks, she might make a drastic move against you--”

“I know her more than I know anyone else here,” he barked, jumping to her defence, “and I’m damn sure as hell that she’ll do no such thing.”

“Revenge is a sweet temptation,” the old man went on persistently, “if I were you I’d worry about spending another night under the same roof as her.”

“On the contrary, I’m worried about her, and not myself,” Jaime snapped, rushing after Brienne, not wishing to hear anything more against her.

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“Brienne,” he called out softly as he entered.

“Stay right there,” she yelled. She was half-way through changing clothes, her pants down and her shirt half open, but it was too late and Jaime was already in.

“What is that?” He approached her with a frown, eyeing the angry red marks on her thighs.

“Nothing,” she said, hastily trying to get into her trousers again, but he was too quick for her, by her side within seconds.

“Show me,” he demanded in a tone that she couldn’t refuse. Gently leading her to the bed, he sat her down. “Lie down, let me see.”

“You don’t have to--” She made to get up, but he firmly held her in place and knelt by her side.

“Was it Locke?” he asked, tenderly running his fingers over the sore wounds, his loathing for the bastard crossing all limits.

“Yes,” she replied, resigning to his touch, not bothering to show him any more resistance.

“Let me.” He took the jar of medicine sitting on the table and began applying it to the affected area, his heart going out to her when she winced every time he touched a particularly sore spot. They’d stabbed her all over, on her inner thighs, on her lower back and her calves, just to cite a few examples. “Where else did they hurt you?” he asked, his stomach churning as a sudden worry gripped him, the fear that they might have delved much deeper, injuring her in other unmentionable places.

“I didn’t let them inflict any more damage,” she said, indirectly addressing his concern.
His worst fears allayed, Jaime allowed himself to breathe, the rage that burned within him returning as soon as the fleeting moment of relief had passed. “As if this is any less. Those fucking bastards need to burn in all the seven hells for what they did to you,” he swore angrily, his hand shaking at the sight of the horrors she’d been put through, all because he’d told them one lie, one fucking lie to save her, one that he’d never in his wildest dreams imagined would have such serious repercussions.

“They’re just tiny scratches—”

“The fuck they are!” he fumed. “Why didn’t you tell me this morning?” This time, his anger was directed at her.

“If I had told you, what would you have done?” she asked, getting to her feet and reaching for her trousers once he’d finished bathing her wounds with the medicine “except, perhaps, swear at them and vent out your rage? Would that do any good to either of us?”

He stepped in to assist her, but she backed away. “I can do it myself, Ser Jaime. I cannot depend on you forever, can I?”

He let her be, not wanting to thrust himself on her, deciding, instead, to do what he’d approached her for. “I came to talk to you, Brienne,” he began as she pulled on her pants, nervously licking his lips, unsure of how to present his side, “about Lady Catelyn—”

Her tone took on an odd note, almost as though she’d caught a cold. “What’s left to talk about it?”

What was he to tell her? Was he to defend his father’s heinous deeds? Or was he to apologize on his behalf? For the first time in all the forty fucking years of his life, he felt ashamed of his family name, unworthy of facing the woman who stood in front of him, the woman to whom he’d sworn to protect the kin of the family his father had so brutally and unscrupulously murdered.

“I feel responsible, for it was my family who brought about it,” he spoke his mind at last, not knowing what else to say, “and I am genuinely sorry that it had to end this way for her. Catelyn Stark was a principled woman, one who loved her children and—”

Brienne looked at him in disbelief. “She spat on your face, she called you an honourless—”

“Yes, she treated me like shit. In spite of that, I’ve always had immense respect and admiration for her,” he said with utmost sincerity.

Fully prepared for the consequences of the events beyond his control, and expecting Brienne to hate him for what happened despite him having no direct hand in it, Jaime decided to relieve her of his company for the rest of their stay. “You might not want me here tonight, so I’m going to move to another room. I’ll talk to the Steelshanks and try to convince him into paying for it.”

He set about gathering his things, wanting to get out of her sight as soon as he could.

“Ser Jaime,” she called out when he was at the door, about to get the fuck out of there.

He spun around at once. “Yes, Lady Brienne?”

“If it isn’t too much trouble—” She struggled to speak, her voice choked, her chin wobbling and her eyes shining with unshed tears, tears that probably would remain within, for she seemed to be among those who considered themselves too strong to cry.

A few quick strides later, he was within a foot’s distance from her. “Brienne,” he murmured, mustering the courage to touch her arm, giving it a gentle, reassuring squeeze, “whatever it is, it’s no
trouble at all.” He was ready to oblige her with anything, whatever it was that she wished of him, for that was the least he could do for her. “Just tell me what you need.”

“Can you--” she faltered again, the tears threatening to break through her resolve.

“It’s perfectly alright to shed tears at times,” he said softly. “Mourning the ones you care for isn’t a sign of weakness.”

His words seemed to have broken an invisible dam. The tears now flowed freely down her cheeks and she began sobbing uncontrollably. “Come here,” he whispered, unable to contain himself as he gathered her in his arms.

Whilst he was prepared for being pushed away, what happened next was completely unexpected, her reaction leaving him somewhat disoriented. Brienne flung her arms around his neck and wept her heart out on his chest. Taken by surprise by her sudden surge of emotions, he soon collected himself, holding her close, letting her vent out her grief for the woman she couldn’t protect, allowing her to unlock her bottled-up anguish for the torment she’d suffered at the hands of the men who had come dangerously close to violating her. Time passed, and she relaxed under his touch, her breathing gradually returning to normal as her sobs began to die down.

She pulled away, her eyes puffy and swollen. “You’re not to blame for what happened,” she said when she was composed enough to speak, her voice thick with emotion and her eyes telling him that she still trusted him and believed in him. “I will never hold you responsible for it.”

He nodded, no other suitable response coming to his head. Normally blessed with the gift of words, it was times like these that left his throat dry and his thinking incoherent. “What was it that you wanted of me?” he asked, suddenly remembering their conversation before her outburst.

“Please don’t leave,” she requested him in a small voice, her cheeks a delightful shade of pink. Her eyes implored him to stay with her, to provide her with some much-needed emotional support.

“I won’t,” he said, reaching for her hand and giving it a soothing rub with his thumb, silently assuring her that he would be there for her for as long as she wished. He’d stay by her side to keep her safe from the monsters that tormented her, not only the ones that lurked outside, but also those within her, the ones that had usurped her mind and robbed her of peace.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

As they near their destination, we delve deeper into Brienne's heart.

Chapter Notes

To those who're wondering why I've wiped out the chapter count, it's because my chapters seem to have a mind of their own :) While I did plan for 22 chapters, I'm getting the feeling that I might have to break down some of the subsequent ones. So to give you an idea, we'll be at around 22-25 chapters. I'll put up the actual number in due course of the story.

It was no small wonder that despite the troubled state of her body and mind, Brienne was able to manage a few precious hours of sleep before opening her eyes to the golden streaks of the morning sun. It wasn’t as if the so-called rest benefited her much, for the burden of the bad news she’d been an unfortunate recipient of, along with the routine punishment of her frequent nightmares had left her tired and yawning when she’d woken up. Accustomed to a soldier’s life of hardships, she was no stranger to fatigue and the frequent occurrences of aches and injuries, but all her problems choosing to strike simultaneously - the death of Lady Stark, the attempted rape on her followed by her torture at the hands of her captors, and the added discomfort of her moonblood, everything hitting her at the same time was a little too much for her to take in her stride.

Even a tough warrior had her limits.

Her attempts to sleep might not have done her much good, but Jaime’s presence around her certainly did, and to a massive extent, in fact, leaving her both surprised and agitated.

She glanced down at the man fast asleep beside her, her mind reduced to a tangled mesh of confusing and conflicting thoughts. A year ago, if someone had suggested that she’d end up getting married and sharing a bed with the Kingslayer, she’d have scoffed at them and dismissed the idea as preposterous. She sighed, gazing at his peaceful, handsome face. Little did she know then that within a short span of a few days, the Kingslayer would become Ser Jaime in her eyes, her opinion of him exactly the opposite of what it had been when they’d first met.

Much to her vexation, the very thought of Jaime was enough to stir up a storm within her. Off late, she’d met with emotions she never knew she could feel, most of which, she herself couldn’t fathom, and thoughts she didn’t know what to do with. Was she supposed to be glad to have him by her side, providing her with the moral support she never knew she needed? Or was she to be disappointed that their acquaintance would be short lived, doomed to last no longer than a few more days?

Had it not been for Jaime, so much could’ve gone wrong for her in the last few days. Two nights in a row, she’d turned to him for comfort, twice she’d laid bare her vulnerable side for him to see. Of all the people she had ever met, she’d chosen Jaime Lannister to open up to and spill her heart out. Casting away her shame and inhibitions, she’d shed desperate tears on his chest. That she’d cried like
a frail woman in his arms left her both comforted and uncomfortable, if that even made a logical combination. She’d told him all about herself, her family, her failures in life, things she’d never told another, and probably never would.

He was the first, and perhaps the last to know so much about her. My only … she paused to ponder, what exactly is he to me?


A friend?

As a child, she’d had very few friends, the number rapidly reducing as she grew older, bigger and taller than the girls whose company she’d kept. The boys wouldn’t accept her either, for being a foot taller than all of them like Jaime had put it, she’d become the object of their ridicule, the abomination of the group. Youth turned out even worse. While other maidens her age grew up pretty and dainty, dreaming about cooking and embroidery and wedding a handsome prince one day, Brienne evolved into an outcast, tall and mannish with no girlish mannerisms nor aspirations, but always the romantic at heart, dreaming of a prince who would, one day, drape his cloak on her and make her his. Sadly, she soon realised that such a fate was not for her, for the boys around her had only one thing in mind, to get inside big Brienne, like Jaime had correctly pointed out, to prove a point to the others their age and sex that they could tame the ugly mule and bed her as a reward. None of them saw her for who she was.

A lover she’d never have, she’d reconciled to that, and no true friends either. People who cared for her didn’t exist as well, so what, then, was Jaime to her? Where did he fit? How in the name of the seven could a man who’d despised her from the bottom of his heart risk himself to save her? Until recently, he was someone who’d wasted no time mocking the life out of her, who had jeered at her and lost no opportunity to point out her shortcomings. He’d left no stone unturned to humiliate her to no end, ensuring she’d been tormented like the worst ever prisoner.

But, interrupted a small voice from deep within her, did he actually intend to hurt me in the first place? She recalled every instance of their explosive altercations, and the only time he’d deliberately done her harm out of malice was during their first and only real fight, when he’d taken her captive. While he’d dragged her around in chains and tried his best to infuriate her to death after that, he’d done nothing adverse, nothing to hurt or violate her when he had the chance handed to him on a platter. A wounded and helpless woman at his mercy, he could’ve chosen to deal with her in the most terrible ways imaginable - torture, rape, death, anything… but he didn’t. His dishonourable reputation had blinded her then, forcing her to see only the bad in him… until Harrenhal happened, an unforeseen eye-opener for both of them.

Could she conclude that he was now a friend? They still belonged to opposite banks of a river, for the Starks and the Lannisters might never share amicable relations, so she didn’t know what exactly he was. And she never would. Their journey would soon end with him back to his beloved sister, the love of his life, and she would soon be gone her way, her life, her quest taking her in an entirely different direction.

And why the hell does that upset me?

“Did you get any sleep last night?” The oddly calming voice shook her out of the world of her thoughts and memories and her growing disappointment that she’d soon be deprived of his company.

Propped up against his pillow, Jaime was watching her intently, green eyes full of concern searching hers for signs of pain. Choosing to ignore her brain’s strict instruction to refrain from staring, she dropped her gaze to his chest, scanning through the open laces of his shirt and settling on the visible
patch of skin that never failed to induce a pleasurable stir in the underside of her belly.

“Wench?” he called out again, forcing her to look him in the eye. “Are you well? Do you need me to fetch Qyburn?”

Heat soaring up the column of her neck, she thanked herself for having stayed within her boundaries last night, sticking to her side of the bed. If not, she would have woken up in his arms again, adding to her already mounting befuddlement. No more avoidable physical contact, she decided, and no awkward situations, for theirs was a bond of respect and deep regard for one another. Nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else it could ever be.

But easier said than done it was, for Brienne was often hit by the frustration of finding herself getting lost in thoughts of him, dwelling more often on their particularly intimate moments.

*Like the time I held him close to my chest in the baths...*

His exquisite beauty indicated one thing to her, the only thing she was absolutely sure of. No matter how nice he was to her, a man like Jaime would never take her for a wife, if given a choice. Their marriage was a mistake, a necessary evil driven by circumstantial need, one that needed to be corrected the moment an opportunity came upon them. And that was the truth, the destiny of a woman like her, one that was born to serve, to dedicate her life to the family of the woman she’d sworn to protect.

“I’m perfectly alright,” she managed, dragging herself awkwardly to the edge of the bed, widening the space between them.

“You look far from *perfectly alright*,” he commented, squinting to observe her closely. Without warning, he nudged closer. “Let me see.” Stretching out his hand, he examined her forehead, his touch leaving her palms sweaty and her heart fluttering violently in its cage. “You don’t seem to have a fever.”

“I--I don’t,” she mumbled, fearing she might melt into a puddle if he didn’t take his hand off immediately.

“Then what’s wrong?” he inquired, unwilling to leave her be, his hand sliding to her cheek and his thumb stroking her gently. “You definitely look unwell.” To her relief, he dropped his hand, putting her out of her agony. Getting off the bed, he strode over to her side. “You can rest another day,” he suggested, sitting down by her side.

She sprang to her senses at once, compelling herself to shrug away the effect he had on her. “I don’t want to. I can travel.”

He regarded her in silence. “Thinking about her?” he asked after a while, his voice softer than normal.

Struck by anguish once again, she fought to contain the angry tears that threatened to fill her eyes. “She was among the few who treated me well,” she recollected, “like Renly, and now--” she sniffed, pausing to compose herself “--look at how they’ve both ended up. I’m obviously cursed, anyone who is kind to me ends up--”

“Stop saying things like that,” he gently cut in, “you’re the best they had… they could’ve ever had. You protected Renly better than anyone else.”

She licked her lips, shaking her head in despair. “I could’ve saved Renly,” she croaked, “I was careless--”
“Stop blaming yourself for things beyond your control, Brienne.” He shifted closer, his palm covering her hand resting on the bed. “I hope you come out of this soon,” he said sincerely, giving her fingers a reassuring squeeze, “I truly do.”

She grabbed a fistful of the bedspread as the heat of his body seeped into her, filling her with a delightful warmth, the grief within her giving way to something else - the familiar, strangely pleasant but uneasy sensation in her stomach which threatened to rapidly find its way to her groin. “I--I’m sorry again,” she replied, deciding that distraction in the form of talking was the only solution to her odd predicament.

His eyes narrowed, and his hand was unmoved, his grip on her tightening. “What for?”

“For inconveniencing you for the second night in a row,” she admitted, choosing to concentrate on a bug on the floor which was far less hassle to focus on than the man who almost always managed to transform her into a shy and bumbling maiden these days, “I didn’t mean to cry my eyes out on you, it was a weak moment, it just happened--”

“Oh, stop apologizing for every little thing, wench,” he scolded her softly, “all I did was attempt to provide whatever little comfort I could.”

She looked up at him smiling. “And I'm grateful for that.”

A long moment passed, a moment where neither of them said a word, each looking into the other’s eyes, leaving Brienne wondering what it could be that he was thinking about her.

*No point asking myself that question, is there?*

“We should start making preparations to leave,” she said, breaking the silence for fear of it planting more complicated thoughts into her head.

“Um…yes,” he murmured, releasing her hand, “we’d better be on the move before the day wears off.”

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They couldn’t have asked for a better day to resume their journey. The sky was clear and the sun shone down upon them with no sign of rain to hamper their progress. Brienne had recovered enough to ride, fast enough to keep within visible distance of their companions and slow enough to linger at the back of the group with only Jaime to keep her company, the others a few feet ahead of them.

“I appreciate what you did last night,” Jaime spoke at last, maintaining a steady pace to stay in line with her.

“I did nothing,” she said, surprised, for it was he who had been there for her.

“You believed in me.” He lowered his voice to a whisper such that only she could hear him. “You believed that I had nothing to do with the misfortune that struck the Starks. You could’ve chosen to blame me for it, Brienne, but you didn’t.” He sounded so sincere and grateful that it made her want to get off her horse and envelop him in a reassuring embrace, holding him tight until the guilt in him melted away.

“Stop thanking me, Ser Jaime, I only did what was right,” she made herself clear. “You’re not your father. The man who took disgrace upon himself to save the population of a city at the cost of an oath that defined him, his very purpose in life--” she paused to exhale deeply “--you’d never abet the mass murder of a whole family, not even that of your enemy, not even if you were by your father when
he’d planned it.”

Jaime broke into a grin, one so charming that it would’ve brought any lady to her knees. “You have so much conviction in my intentions?” he asked, a hint of playfulness appearing in his tone. “I can’t believe you’re the same woman I met in that muddy pen months ago, the one with such revulsion and disdain for me, so much that it could’ve shamed the hell out of the worst criminal around.”

“That was then,” she mumbled, ready to launch into an explanation. “When I first met you, you were the most despicable and dishonourable man alive—”

He brought his mount to an abrupt halt, surprising her enough to follow suit. “And now?” His eyes were on hers and his voice a hoarse whisper. “What do you think of me now, Brienne?”

The depth of his gaze and the sudden change in his tone stunned her into a few seconds of speechlessness. “There’s honour in you,” she managed after a while, glad that her tongue was still alive, “I’ve seen it.”

Her words seemed to have an unexpected impact on him, for the smile disappeared, giving way to a haunted look in those emerald eyes. “I’ve done things I’m not proud of,” he said brusquely, “things that would alter your opinion of me again. You wouldn’t think that well of me if you knew of my other crimes apart from kingslaying.”

Curiosity and the need to know more compelled Brienne to push further, but she waited, deeming it prudent not to ask.

“I was the one who pushed little Bran Stark off the window,” he confessed, jerking his eyes off hers, “I did it because he saw me with Cersei, I had to protect my family.”

His revelation came not as a surprise or a shock for Brienne, but merely a confirmation of what she’d heard from Lady Catelyn. There was no pride in him, not even satisfaction at having achieved his means. All she could sense was guilt and a tinge of helplessness, something that told her that he’d acted on instinct, seeing no other way to save his family from the wrath of the king.

“Say something, wench,” he prodded her, his tone bordering on agitation, “I’ve spilled out another terrible secret to you, and all you have in response is silence? I’m sure this has you thinking again, I can’t blame you if you revert to your initial opinion of me—”

Brienne began, measuring her words carefully, making her best effort to express her conflicting thoughts. “I don’t condone what you did—”

“I knew you’d think so,” he cut across, his eyes laden with acceptance and disappointment. He looked deflated, a man defeated, a victim of his disastrous decisions, his crimes and the circumstances that led him to those. “I expected your reaction and you’re justified to your views of me. I told you because you deserve to hear the truth.” He sighed softly. “I didn’t want you to think too highly of me, as the man I’m not.”

“While I obviously don’t approve of these acts—” she licked her lips nervously, summoning the courage to speak her mind “—I also know that you’re not that man anymore.”

“I’ve killed innocents,” he went on, his expression vacant, “I killed my own cousin—”

“You did then, but you wouldn’t do such a thing again,” she firmly asserted, holding on to her belief, the voice from the depths of her heart that screamed to her that there was good in him.

“I’d do anything for my family,” he maintained, his eyes boring holes in her soul, “for Cersei.”
“You would,” she concurred, in spite of her heart sinking at the mention of his sister, “but I doubt you’d hurt a child again nor would you take another innocent life. The man who lost his hand and willingly risked being mauled by a bear for a woman he barely knew and hated from the bottom of his heart—”

“I don’t,” his voice went up a notch.

“You don’t—what?”

“Nothing.” He appeared to be on the verge of saying something, but checked himself, gesturing to her to go on instead.

“You saved me,” she continued, “at great risk to your life. That tells me a lot about you for me to form an opinion, more than your past deeds.” She hesitated before she could speak further. “You’re not that man anymore, Ser Jaime,” she reiterated.

He said nothing after that, and they resumed riding, and for a while there was complete silence, the hooves of their horses the only sound. “I treated you like shit, didn’t I?” he began again after a while.

Brienne had to bite back a smile at the recollection. “You did, but I was no less either.”

“I’m sorry for causing you pain, my lady, physical and mental—”

“You did what you thought was in your best interests then, of course, that doesn’t mean your actions can be justified. You hated me and so did I,” she said, waving away his apology. “Our circumstances and loyalties were--are such that we could’ve ended up with nothing but resentment towards each other.”

“Do you--” he hesitated, something hindering his usually easy flow of words “--hate me even now?”

A flurry of thoughts and unwanted emotions raced through her mind. “I respect you,” she said, carefully choosing her words again.

Jaime frowned at her response. “That’s not an answer to my question, Brienne.”

“That’s the best you’re going to get, Ser Jaime.”

He was about to say something when Steelshanks shouted at them from a distance. “You lovers,” he barked, “keep up. You’ll have a lot of time for other things later.”

Her ears on fire, Brienne seized control of the reins, giving her horse a push to move faster. “We ought to speed up.”

“I wonder why he thinks we’re lovers,” Jaime remarked in a tone that told her that he was as bothered as her with the man’s baseless assumption.

As the morning progressed, they rode at a decent pace, covering good distance. But with the noon sun shining down on their heads, they slowed down, the horses trudging along, tired and hungry. “We should stop for a while,” Steelshanks announced, taking a detour towards a shady clump of trees. “The horses need to be fed and so do we.”

Thankful for the well-deserved break, Brienne got off her horse and picked a tree, tethering the beast to the trunk. Throwing her saddle bag over her shoulder, she decided to head for a lake not far from where they were, the strain of the travel and her increased bleeding making her want to clean up before they resumed.
To avoid embarrassment and an unnecessary explanation to the men, she was about to quietly slink away, when Jaime caught up with her. “Where are you off to?” he asked, approaching her as he spoke.

“To the lake, I need a bath,” she uttered the first thing that came to her mind, keeping the messy details of her feminine discomfort to herself.

He caught her in an arresting gaze of scrutiny, one that had her squirming. “You just had a bath this morning,” he said, his tone betraying his suspicion of her intent, “before we left. It’s only been a few hours.”

“I have to… um… clean up,” she struggled with speech, looking everywhere but at him.

“Clean up?”

“Yes.” She turned away, desperate to leave him behind and rush off before he could question her further.

He tugged at her arm to stop her. “I’m coming with you.”

Blanching at his insistence, she furiously worked her head for an excuse to ward him off her trail. “I can take care of myself, Ser Jaime.”

“I know you can, but I’m not letting you go anywhere alone.” His voice steely and his stance determined, he was in no mood for pointless arguments. “Not after the scare you gave me at the inn when you wandered off by yourself.”

“Please! Let me go,” she cried out, worried that he might force his company on her. “I swear I won’t run away this time.”

“Why don’t you want me to accompany you?” The suspicion in his eyes grew. “What are you hiding from me, wench?”

“Nothing.” To her dismay, she sounded awfully squeaky and girlish.

“My lady—” he began, his patience waning.

“It’s not something you’d want to know,” she mumbled, biting her lip.

“Trust me, I do want to know.”

His penetrating gaze set her face aflame. “It’s none of any man’s business.”

“What do you mean—” he stopped abruptly, colouring as enlightenment dawned on him. “Oh,” was all he said.

Thankful that there were no further explanations to be provided to anyone, she began to head off in the direction of the lake.

“I’m coming with you,” he said, following her. “I promise, I won’t look. I’ll keep my distance,” he assured her before she could open her mouth to complain.

Accepting defeat, Brienne gave up, seeing no sense in further discussion. Far from engaging in a conversation, they were both too abashed to look at each other, quietly making their way to the lake in what was perhaps the most uncomfortable spell of silence Brienne had ever been a part of.
“I should probably sit here.” Jaime settled down on a rock a couple of feet from the lake, facing away from her, leaving her to her privacy.

Convinced that no one was looking, Brienne pulled down her breeches and her smallclothes, uncovering the bloodsoaked bundle of cloth that had been bothering her for a while. Replacing it with a fresh set from her bag, she set about scrubbing it clean on a rock, squeezing the bloodstains out of it. Once done, she set it out on the stone to dry under the blazing sun.

“Are you done?” he called out, reminding her of his presence.

“I am, but I’ve left some clothes out to dry. We’re going to have to be here for a while.”

The next second, he was by her side. “I could do with a bath in the meantime,” he announced, clawing at his shirt with the only hand he had, his effort, as usual, bearing no success.

Unable to overcome her inherent urge to assist the helpless, she knocked his hand away. “Let me,” she muttered, taking charge of his laces and pulling the shirt off him.

“Stop it, wench,” he said, his voice a low rumble that raised questionable emotions inside her, “I can’t afford to get used to you doing such things for me.”

“I--” Worried that she’d gone too far and offended him, she fumbled for words, her palm accidentally resting on his bare chest for a second longer than necessary. Stepping aside as soon as she realized it, she turned away to hide her burning cheeks from his all-perceiving eyes. “My apologies, I just wanted to help. I’ll wait right there.” Without sparing him another look, she ran away to take his place on the boulder.

She spent the next few moments, restless and unsettled, trying to put herself together, to shake herself back to normalcy. It’s just the effect of him being nice to me, she convinced herself, all I bear in my heart is respect and regard and a deep sense of caring for the man who saved me. Yes, that’s all I feel for Jaime, nothing more, she decided, vowing to act less like a silly girl in his presence and more like herself, the mighty warrior and swordswoman.

“I’ve finished,” he called out from behind her, “we can leave if you’re ready.”

Trying not to stare through his unlaced shirt or at his freshly washed hair or the beads of water that kissed his neck, she darted off to fetch her cloth which had dried by now.

“Let’s go,” she said, stuffing it into her bag.

“I’d like a little help here.” He pointed to his exposed chest.

This request just minutes after his admonishment baffled her. “You just told me to stay away.”

“That was because I didn’t want to--” Once more he seemed to have forgotten what he had to say.

“What?” she demanded.

His expression abruptly changed, the intense look giving way to a mischievous glint in his eyes. “I’m afraid I have no choice, my lady, the better options are all back at the camp.” His tone and his sly grin told her that he’d slipped into one of his lighter moods, one that she almost always was a victim of. “I’d request Steelshanks or Qyburn, but unfortunately, you’re the only one I have here with me--”

Refusing to fall for his teasing, she raced ahead. “Why don’t you go back and ask one of them, then?” she retorted, her voice icier than she’d intended.
He burst out laughing. “You’re my wife, wench, not them,” he called out, hurrying after her. “Oblige me one last time, will you?”

She stopped, deciding to indulge him this time. Glowering, she pulled him closer, reaching out to tighten his laces. “The next time you want a favour from me—” she yanked him towards her with more force than required, nearly strangling him as she pulled his laces together “—try to keep the taunts away.”

He pretended to look hurt. “You call this a favour?”

“I definitely do,” she snapped, “and mockery isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

“I wasn’t mocking,” he immediately justified, “just teasing you a bit. Besides, did you not decide to ignore my jokes?”

She pushed him away when she was done with him. “Next time,” she tried to sound as severe as she could, “find someone else to do this for you.”

Undeterred by her irritation, he went on. “I can think of no one else—”

But Brienne wasn’t listening to him, distracted by the sound of leaves rustling behind him. “Watch out!” she cried, pushing him out of harm’s way when a man jumped down the tree under which they stood. Overcome by a rush of impulse, she tackled him, wrestling him to the ground. Having no weapon on her, she worked her brain for quick ideas, for she would stand no chance against an assailant wielding a dagger for long if she didn’t soon strike the fatal blow.

The sight of a rock within an arm’s length was the solution to her problem. Pinning her adversary down with her body and one arm, she reached out for the stone and brought it to his head with a well aimed blow that drew blood and a blood curdling scream from him.

Unmoved, she heaved a sigh of relief when she was certain that he was no more.

“You were unarmed, Brienne.”

“One of King Robb’s men,” she observed, noticing the direwolf on the man’s chest, “they’re still after you.”

“Why did you jump on him?”

Jaime’s quivering voice forced her to glance up at him. “That was stupid, did you realize that? You could’ve died.” His eyes burned with worry and anger.

“He would’ve killed you if I had not acted,” she said quietly, wondering why in the seven hells was he so enraged when all she’d done was step in to protect him.

He held out a hand to help her up. “If that rock hadn’t been there—” he trailed away, leaving what he was about to say incomplete.

“It would’ve been good riddance for you.” She chuckled, deciding to lighten the tension. “I’d have died and—”

“Stop it!” he shouted, clenching his fist. Brienne stared at him, dumbfounded. For the first time, their roles appeared to have been reversed and he was the one to have taken offence to her joke, his eyes shining with such rage and fear that she’d never seen before.
“My life is of no value, Ser Jaime,” she said in a small voice, realizing how true that was, “unlike--”

“Will you shut your mouth, wench?” he growled. “Now get the hell up.”

She obeyed him without argument, taking his hand and scrambling to her feet.

“Henceforth, never make the mistake of underestimating the value of your life, my lady,” he told her, his tone much softer than before. “You may not think of it as important, but there might be others who definitely do.”

Brienne trudged alongside him, more confused than before, her resolve to steer clear of thoughts about him slowly melting away like wax under a flame.

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“Here we are at last!” Jaime exclaimed happily, his voice dripping with delight and relief when he beamed at Brienne as they walked into the gates of the Red Keep. “I can finally see Cersei again.”

*Yes, here we are*, she realized, for this marked the end of their association, their explosive and eventful companionship, their friendship and their so-called marriage.

“Watch where you’re going, you country boy!” a passer-by shouted, throwing the raggedy, unshaven and unrecognizable golden lion of Lannister a look of contemptuous disgust.

Crestfallen and demotivated, Jaime stood where he was.

Brienne matched step with him. “It’ll take time,” she said soothingly, giving him a comforting smile, “when they come to know who you are, they’ll sing a different tune.”

He glanced down at his stump sadly, giving her a forced smile in return before they made their way towards their destination.

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“You don’t know how happy I am to see you, brother!” Tyrion beamed at him, wringing his hand affectionately.

“So am I.” Despite being upset by the unanticipated behaviour of the rest of his family, Jaime couldn’t help smiling, touched by the warmth in his brother’s voice, an unmistakable sign of love and the special bond that the two lions shared.

“Stay for a drink,” Tyrion insisted, leading him to the table.

It appeared to Jaime that his brother was the only person with a positive reaction to see him safely back home. Disappointment would be an understatement to describe Cersei’s behaviour towards him. “I expected you back in one piece,” she had said, throwing a look of disgust and revulsion at his missing hand.

“Have you met Cersei?” Tyrion inquired, pouring him a glass of Dornish wine, a privilege he’d been deprived of for nearly a year.

He nodded, eyeing his stump glumly.
“Let me guess, instead of welcoming you with a hug, she made it a point to criticize you for losing the most important part of yourself,” his brother correctly surmised.

Once again, he quietly nodded, despair filling his heart. How he’d ached to rush into Cersei’s arms, to be back to the woman whose company he’d missed all these months, the sibling he loved the most, the love of his life, and the lover whose bed he’d craved to warm again! All he had expected was a proper welcome, a loving embrace, a tender kiss, but the only thing he got in return for all his love for her was a look of scorn, an accusation that was meant to leave him guilty and embarrassed, making him feel like a failure and a blot on his family name.

Unbidden, his thoughts left his sister, straying towards Brienne as he recollected the way she’d jolted him out of his depression, motivating him to brush aside his loss and move on with his life instead of wallowing in self-pity.

Tyrion muttered something, clicking his tongue in disapproval.

“I’m sorry, what were you saying?” Lost in memories of Harrenhal and his head full of the wench, Jaime was barely paying attention to his brother.

“I was saying I’m not surprised, and that such behaviour is so typical of our sister,” Tyrion repeated, eyeing him curiously. “What’s wrong with you?” He leaned across, peering into Jaime’s eyes. “You look--” he frowned “--lost, confused, muddled.”

“I’m not... lost or confused,” Jaime quickly replied, thanking the gods that his brother had no power to read minds. Tyrion being the shrewdest in the family, he was quick to pick on people’s emotions, even the slightest signs of them and gauge what was going on in their hearts.

Fortunately Tyrion appeared to be convinced and didn’t press the matter further. “And what about father,” he asked, “have you met him?”

Jaime managed a mirthless laugh, recalling the not-so-amicable meeting with Tywin. “Father gave me--” he got to his feet and pulled out a sword from his belt, placing it on the table “--this. Valyrian steel, one among the very few in existence, one of a pair to be freshly reforged from Ned Stark’s blade.”

Tyrion nodded in approval. “A welcome a warrior deserves, a weapon befitting the skills of the golden lion himself. What more could you ask for? He loves you, his first-born son, the heir to--”

“I haven’t finished yet,” Jaime interrupted his barrage of words, a stream that would never stop once started. “He disowned me minutes after he handed me this, called me a glorified bodyguard when I announced my decision to renounce the Rock and remain in the Kingsguard.”

“He couldn’t have, you’re his pride, his heir--”

“I don’t want to be his heir,” Jaime repeated the words he’d told his father. With a sigh, he sat down again, eyeing the sword, knowing he was no more worthy of it. “I don’t want Casterly Rock, I don’t want--”

“--I know what you want,” Tyrion cut in sternly, “but is it really worth it? If she can’t accept you for who you are, is she worthy of your love?”

“Give her time,” Jaime jumped to his sister’s defence, “she’ll get over it. It’s a shock to her, after all.” His father’s words had discouraged him beyond measure. “A one handed cripple, a good for nothing,” he lamented, “that’s what I am.”
“You’re the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard,” Tyrion said proudly, “the mighty Kingslayer--”

“I can’t even slay a pigeon.”

“Command, then.” Tyrion had a solution to every problem in the world. “You don’t have to fight--”

Jaime shook his head, forlorn.

“I know a way out of your problem,” chimed in his brother with a bright smile. “Start using your left hand. Learn to fight. Train--”

“That’s impossible,” Jaime shot down the idea at once, “people will know. Men talk and it isn’t good--”

“Do it with discretion, with the right person--”

“The right person?”

“Yes,” said Tyrion, bubbling with enthusiasm, “I know just the right--”

“So do I,” Jaime stopped him, only one name coming to his mind. “I know who I’d like to train with, someone who knows me, my strengths and weaknesses…” he trailed away, suddenly excited by the prospect of sparring with the only warrior who had proven herself as skilful as him, if not more.

“I was about to suggest Bronn, but you already seem to have picked your partner,” Tyrion broke his train of thoughts. “Now would you be kind enough to tell me who it is?”

“Brienne of Tarth,” he revealed, smiling, “none better than her and no one worthier.”

“Our enemy?” Tyrion blurted out, surprised.

“She isn’t our enemy,” Jaime corrected him hastily, “I mean, she’s loyal to Catelyn Stark, but she isn’t--” he struggled for words to describe what it was he shared with the wench “--we aren’t exactly hostile around each other.”

Tyrion observed him for a whole long minute.

“What?” Jaime asked, mildly intimidated by his brother’s ominous silence. Tyrion mincing no words while talking was a sure sign of danger, but his silence was far higher a threat than any words he could unleash on the object of his scrutiny.

“Nothing,” said his brother, his tone uncharacteristically tame.

“Thank you,” said Jaime, relieved, going back to sipping his wine.

“Podrick!” Tyrion shouted without warning and a timid-looking lad appeared.

“Y-yes m’lord?” he stammered.

“Would you go and fetch Lady Brienne, please? Tell her that Ser Jaime and I request the pleasure of her company for a drink--”

Jaime had to stop his brother before he ended up doing something stupid. “Tyrion, don’t--”

“That will be all, Pod,” Tyrion dismissed the boy, completely ignoring Jaime’s objection. “I want to meet her, Jaime,” he said, once they were alone again, “any friend of yours is also a friend of mine.”
“I didn’t say she’s a friend,” mumbled Jaime, his heart thundering at twice its normal pace.

“Who is she, then?” Tyrion was smart enough to spot his discomfort.

“My wife,” Jaime whispered, unable to lie to his brother.

“Your WHAT?” Tyrion shouted, knocking his glass on the table, its contents spreading slowly across the tablecloth.

“Yes, I married her, and will you please not shout?” he hissed irritably. “This has to be a secret between us, you can tell no one else about it.”

He went on to regale his brother with his tale, starting from how he’d held her prisoner and ending at Harrenhal, carefully omitting details about their promise to get Sansa back to her family. Sansa was his sister-in-law now and it wasn’t wise to discuss details about smuggling her out of the castle when his brother was around.

Tyrion let out a low whistle. “That was one hell of an adventure.”

“It was.”

“M’lords!” Pod was back, and with him was Brienne, dressed in a blue gown that brought out the colour of her eyes. Jaime sprang to his feet the moment she arrived, and Tyrion followed suit, but not without a suspicious look he seemed to have specially reserved for his brother.

“Lord Tyrion,” she greeted him, “and Ser Jaime.” She gave him a fleeting glance and a little nod.

Tyrion dragged a chair for her. “A pleasure to meet you, my lady, or should I call you sister?” He beamed, kissing her hand. “Jaime was just telling me the story of your marriage.” His eyes twinkling, he poured her a drink.

“That was--” she faltered, her eyes nervously darting between the brothers.

“A marriage of convenience, I know,” said Tyrion, once they were seated again, “but a real wedding, nonetheless, one that is binding in the eyes of the gods.”

“Lady Brienne,” Jaime intervened, deciding it was time to steer the conversation clear of dangerous territory, “I have a request to make of you.”

“Yes, Ser Jaime?”

“Would you do me the favour of training with me?” he asked, hoping she’d consider. “I wish to fight with my left hand, and who better than you to hone my skills under?”

She hesitated. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Ser Jaime, it would be inappropriate--”

“It’s a fantastic idea,” Tyrion chimed in heartily. “Of course, it is to remain a secret between us. I know a secluded place by the bay, one where no one ever comes.”

Brienne still looked ill at ease. “I won’t be here for long.”

“For as long as you’re here?” Jaime implored. “Think about it, my lady.” He wanted no one but her to train him, but he didn’t want to push her into something she didn’t wish to indulge in.

“I can’t,” she said again.
“Very well.” Disappointment crushed him, but he thought it wise to let the matter be. “Tell your friend Bronn,” he said, turning to Tyrion, “to meet me tomorrow morning.”

“Let’s give your wife another day to think about it,” replied his brother, his lips curving in a smile.

That was the end of the subject for the evening and the conversation moved to Sansa and Tyrion’s marriage to her. It was mostly Brienne chatting with him, wanting to know more about the girl, while Jaime was reduced to a silent spectator, spending most of his time gazing at her beautiful eyes, lost in their intoxicating depths.

“Jaime, I’m talking to you!” Tyrion yelled in his ear, tugging at his sleeve vigorously.

His trance broken, Jaime straightened in his chair. “Sorry, I must have dozed off,” he made a feeble attempt to cover up his lapse with the first excuse that came to his head. “What were you saying?”

“I was asking if you’d be kind enough to escort Lady Brienne to her chambers.” Tyrion threw Jaime a menacing look that said he’d deal with him later, when they were alone. “It’s quite late and it’s not uncommon for a guest to be lost in search of a room in this castle if left unassisted.”

Glad to get away from his brother’s sharp eyes and craving for some much-needed rest, Jaime led Brienne out of Tyrion’s room. They neither said anything nor looked at each other until they’d made it to Brienne’s chambers.

“About Sansa,” she began, coming to a halt at the doorstep.

“Not here,” he hastily warned her, worried that the guards might overhear, “we’ll talk about it later. I promise.”

She nodded, stepping into the room.

“I hope to see you later, my lady,” he said, taking leave of her. He was just about to walk away when she spoke again.

“Tomorrow, then.”

He turned on his heel, unsure if he’d heard her properly. “Tomorrow?”

“Yes, I’ll meet you early in the morning,” she repeated, “don’t be late.”

“Why?” He blinked at first, but when he realized what she meant, he looked at her again for confirmation. “Are you sure--I mean, is that a yes--do you really accept my--”

“Don’t keep me waiting,” she warned him, a faint half-smile gracing her lips before she shut the door.

Grinning to himself, Jaime raced through the corridors, his heart pounding in excitement, the newfound vigour in him ousting his despair and filling him with fresh enthusiasm. Blood rushed through his veins in anticipation, an inexplicable feeling rising inside him as looked forward to the day that was to dawn.
Jaime tossed and turned and desperately tried to sleep, attempting to wipe out his thoughts, but no matter how hard he tried, he was continuously distracted by mental images of the wench sparring with him, some of them reminiscent of their first duel, most of them, however, the creation of his imagination. All these elaborately conjured fights in his head, for some reason, ended with him sprawled on the ground and her sitting on him, enjoying her victory whilst leaving him with a strange feeling deep within, something which had no connection, whatsoever, with swordplay or his desire to polish his skills.

*It has nothing to do with Brienne,* he explained to himself, switching sides for the hundredth time in the last hour or two. *It's just that I'm no more used to this comfort, this soft bed, the security of the Red Keep,* he told the ceiling. Perhaps, these days, he could sleep better on cold, hard floors and the bug-infested smelly beds of dingy old inns. With the passage of days he’d get used to being back home, to the familiarity of his bedchamber, to having Cersei by his side and in his bed.

*Cersei.*

He shut his eyes, invoking thoughts of his sister, wishing for better times with her after a long period of being deprived of their togetherness. He hoped to rekindle their love for each other, wanting nothing more than to bed her again, because fucking was the only other thing after swordplay that made him feel truly alive. Finally under the same roof as the woman he loved, he wanted to look forward to such glorious moments again.

He wanted to look forward to Cersei… but, to his dismay, when he searched his heart, he realized that he actually... *didn’t!*

*I’ll be back to normal in the morning,* he convinced his raging mind, pushing himself to get some rest, *it’s just that I’ve been away from her for too long.*

Letting his head sink into the softness of his pillow, he let his mind wander, drifting in and out of consciousness, visions of his pretty sister alternating with the freckled face of his homely wife. *Get out of my head,* he attempted to drive the wench away, and disappear she did, only to return every few seconds, her presence fighting for dominance with his sister in the realm of his subconscious.

A knock on the door shook him out of his reverie, and he almost fell off the bed, caught unawares by the insanely loud sound of it in the deadly silence.

“Who the fuck lacks the decency to visit people this late?” he grumbled, dragging himself to the door and jerking it open. Before he could react, Cersei swayed past him, unleashing all her womanly grace on him and kicked the door shut.
“Gods, you look so much better with that awful beard shaved off,” she remarked, throwing him an appreciative gaze, “so unlike the filthy beggar you looked like when you walked into the keep.”

Beggar, huh? What is she going to call me next, a fucking cripple?

“I’ve been through a lot,” he vaguely defended himself, avoiding the details of the trauma he and Brienne had endured, “did you really expect me to return dressed in princely robes and riches?”

Her features softened when she noticed that her words had disturbed him. “I didn’t mean to upset you,” she purred, stepping into his personal space and gracing him with a smile that usually would’ve been followed by him grabbing her and shoving her on the bed. “Forgive my harsh words,” she breathed into his face, running her forefinger along his cheek. “I was merely upset with your maiming.” Her finger slid further down, tracing the outline of his lip.

By this time, he’d have had her on the bed, pounding into her with abandon as she screamed his name, but to his astonishment, Jaime hardly felt a thing tonight. No excitement at her touch, no zeal to drag her off to the bed and strip her down, no urge to fuck her into oblivion, to revive the memories of what being inside her felt like.

He was given no opportunity to think, nor react. A long, hard look later, Cersei grabbed him by his tunic and stood on her toes, pulling him into a kiss before he knew what was happening. This was exactly the welcome Jaime could have asked for, this was all he had craved for, everything he’d dreamed of the whole year he was away from her, locked away in solitude with nothing but rodents and other disgusting creatures for company.

Jaime wanted to kiss her back, to enjoy her warm lips against his, to seek the familiarity of her sweet mouth again--

I am hers, and she is mine...

The words sprang up out of nowhere, drilling deep inside his head, reminding him of that day in the Sept when the wench stood beside him in place of Cersei, her wrist bound to his when they had pledged themselves to one another, when they’d vowed to have no one but each other until the end of their days.

It didn’t mean anything, he wanted to convince himself, but to his annoyance, he couldn’t, he was unable to give himself to the woman in his arms, let alone share her passion for their union--

“I can’t--” he gently pushed her away, clutching his forehead in disbelief.

Cersei met his eyes, disappointment and suspicion casting a shadow on her beautiful face. “What’s the matter, Jaime?”

“N--Not tonight,” he managed, looking everywhere, but at her. Stunned by his unexpected rejection of her, he scanned his mind for a valid reason, but none seemed to be readily available, nothing to explain his sudden disinterest in the love of his life who had literally knocked on his door to throw herself in his arms and in his bed. “I’m just tired,” he said, bringing up the first excuse his dishonest tongue pushed out. “It’s been a long and eventful journey and I’d appreciate some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning,” he told her, hoping she’d leave him alone to ponder his odd behaviour.

She withdrew to the table not far from his bedside. “Drink?” she asked, pouring out a goblet of wine and settling herself on the nearest chair.

Jaime shook his head, standing where he was, wondering what he was about to be subjected to. “This is no time for a drink,” he tried to subtly send her away.
“There’s no such thing as a time for a drink,” she replied with a smirk, taking a swig off her goblet.

“What is it, Cersei?”

“You tell me.” She looked up from her glass, the smile now taking on an ominous edge. “You’ve never shunned me before. So what is it? What happened when you were away? Have you met someone else, have you bedded another in my absence—”

“You know I’d never even look at another woman,” Jaime stopped her before she could go too far.

“You returned with one,” she shot back, her tone laced with venom, “if you can call that a woman.”

“You know why she’s here,” he retorted, fighting to suppress the wave of anger that arose in his chest at the insult.

“I also know that she’s a sworn servant of Catelyn Stark,” his sister bounced back, “and that she’s had you in chains all along—”

“It was actually the other way round.” The truth was out of his mouth before he could stop himself, and he went on, “I beat her in a fight, I was the one to drag her here in chains, bound and cuffed like a beast—”

“And why do you care? If she was being defiled, then so be it, what came over you to jump in as her saviour?”

“Because I’m a knight,” he argued, raising his voice, “and I do try and attempt to be honourable at times. While honour may be of no importance to you, it is to me.”

“In your insane quest for honour, have you forgotten that she’s our enemy?” Cersei reminded him, bitterness oozing out of every pore of her reddening face.

“She’s no enemy,” Jaime defended her again, “I can vouch for her.” With that, he decided to say no more for fear of inadvertently revealing too much.
Cersei was quiet for a while, and for the next few seconds the only sound in the room was her heavy breathing, her flaming eyes threatening to burn him to ashes if he didn’t come out with the truth. Such power there was in her gaze, but Jaime was relentless, holding his ground. At no cost would he let any harm come to the wench. Even if it meant preserving the truth that they were man and wife forever.

“Why is she still here?” she asked. “What does this woman want from you?”

“Nothing,” answered Jaime, once again untruthfully, “she’s here on my request, as a guest to the royal wedding.”

If looks could kill, Cersei’s would certainly be the one to do the deed. “This is my son’s wedding we’re talking about, you have no right to bring in our enemies and bloody whores you picked up on the streets—”

“Careful there,” warned Jaime, his rage matching hers, “if it weren’t for me, your son wouldn’t even have been born.” Diverting his thoughts, he forced himself to calm down. “And if it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t be here today. So Lady Brienne is my guest until Joffrey’s wedding. After that, she will be on her way.”

Stunned into silence by Jaime’s admonishment of her, Cersei had no more nasty words to shower him with, and they simply stood there glaring at each other.

“Goodnight, Cersei,” he said, holding the door open for her, hinting that it was time for her to leave him be.

“I’ll talk to you later,” she told him, her tone icy. “maybe when you’ve regained your sanity and are more receptive to me.” Setting her glass down, she got up and made for the door, but turned to him before she could step out. “You had her your prisoner, so why did you keep her alive? I’m sure you tried to kill—”

“--once,” he admitted, thanking the gods that he had decided against getting rid of her, “but I couldn’t.”

“Why? For a man who has killed innumerable innocents before, surely one more woman wouldn’t have mattered much?”

“I had kept her alive for my own protection,” he said truthfully, recalling his selfishness when they’d first set out on their return.

“A knight of your calibre surely needs no protection,” she was quick to point out, “and that too a woman’s—”

“She’s a far truer knight than I’ve ever been,” he repeated Catelyn Stark’s first words to him about Brienne, only now fully realizing what she’d actually meant.

Cersei threw him one last blazing look and then she sauntered away, once again, leaving him with nothing but his solitude and the storm in his mind to keep him company.

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“Are you even listening to me?” came the wench’s irate voice from somewhere above him. Jaime glanced up, holding his hand out to block the sun. For the third time in minutes, she’d had him flat on the ground. Only now did he come to note the full extent of his handicap, the inexperience of his left hand lasting no longer than a few seconds against her raw strength and seasoned expertise. To make
matters worse, he was left unsettled and upset by his late night squabble with Cersei, and wasn’t his usual self when he reported for training with Brienne this morning, his concentration far from its usual impeccable peak.

But somehow, the mere sight of the wench when he’d arrived made him feel better, filling him hope that he could do better. His happiness, however, was short lived, for his trainer seemed to be determined to keep him on the floor for as long as she could.

Groaning, he took her hand and shuffled to his feet. “Maybe you ought to fight with your left hand too, wench,” he muttered, “then you’ll know what it feels like. Say, why don’t we try that? A wrong-handed duel is a challenge I can definitely win against you.”

She gave him a severe look, reminding him of the maester Tywin had employed to teach him when he was a boy. “We could do that, but then it wouldn’t be training you, would it?”

“Stubborn as you’ve always been,” he muttered under his breath, forcing himself to pick up the tourney sword.

But she’d heard him. “If you’re going to be difficult about it, there’s no point in me or anyone else trying to help you with it. It is merely a waste of time. So goodbye, Ser Jaime, and have a nice day sparring with yourself.” Her face screwed in anger, she turned to leave, but Jaime grabbed her hand.

“Not so fast, wench.” He pulled her back. “You made me a promise last night. And now it’s time to honour it,” he told her, fighting back a smile at her child-like innocence, “so stop being this serious about everything and pick up your sword.”

“Of all the people who could’ve trained me, I preferred you because you’re my equal, my lady,” he went on when she remained quiet, “someone I can look up to, someone to whom my name or title isn’t intimidating, someone who wouldn’t shy away from telling me the truth or pointing out my flaws, someone who wouldn’t hesitate to tell me that I’m an idiot.” He bent to pick up her sword. “Here,” he urged, handing it to her, “help me become the swordsman I once was, Brienne.”

“Very well,” she agreed, her expression clearing as she seemed slightly mollified by his flattery, “you are.”

“I am--what?”

“An idiot,” she mouthed, barely audible, her lips curving in a small smile.

Trying to stamp down the elation soaring in him because he was the reason for her smile, he decided to get back into action. A distraction was what he desperately needed to keep him away from other budding distractions. “As it pleases you, wench. Now let’s get on with it.”

“Um--” she stammered, turning an adorable shade of pink as she stood rooted to the spot.

“What?” The fact that he had begun to enjoy her blushes these days wasn’t helping, his confusion only increasing with every such occurrence.

“You ought to let go of my hand first, Ser Jaime,” she mumbled in an abnormally squeaky, girlish voice.

“My apologies.” He was the flustered one now, realizing only after she’d pointed out that he was once again holding her hand. Embarrassed, he dropped her wrist and stepped away, picking up his weapon and taking his position.
“Your stance is fine,” she remarked, getting back to her usual self.

“I’m no squire,” he shot back, indignant that she was treating him like one, “just focus on my handwork—”

“So the first thing we need to do is correct the way you hold your weapon,” she went on, paying no attention to his tantrum. Standing next to him, she gripped his wrist, adjusting the orientation of his blade. “This should be better.” She moved away when she was satisfied, taking her place in front of him again. “Try disarming me now.”

Jaime lunged at her, awkward as ever, his left limb feeling more artificial than his own. And again he failed, poking into thin air instead of her arm that he was supposed to be aiming at. No novice at her art, she was quick to take advantage of his mis-strike. Knocking the weapon off his hand with one clean stroke, she tripped him, sending him once again to the hard ground, adding insult to the numerous injuries his backside had borne since they’d begun that morning.

But it wasn’t over yet. His hand was gone, but his other combat skills were still alive, particularly a keen eye for his opponent’s mistakes. All it took was a second for her to take her eyes off him, and he was quick to seize the chance. This time I’m not going to let you taste victory, he thought to himself. Grabbing her by the wrist, he pulled her with him until he lay on his back with her sprawled on him… just like in his visions. Before she could respond or use her weapon, he summoned all his strength and rolled over until he was on top and she under him, her eyes wide with disappointment and dismay at her inability to counter him, her face red with annoyance with her carelessness for having fallen for something this trivial.

She was the one with the sword, but thoroughly helpless, twitching and struggling under him, unable to budge, her hands, her legs, her body, all of her bound between him and the ground, the awkwardness of their position reminding him of their unforgettable encounter in the rain, not many days ago.

“That’s not—” she began, but arrested by his piercing gaze, she seemed to have forgotten what she had to say.

“What?” he asked, pressing his body hard into hers and pinning her right arm to the ground with his, rendering her hand immobile and her weapon useless.

“Fair,” she mumbled, squirming uncontrollably beneath him, her hips leading to an undesirable development inside his breeches.

“Of course it is, I’ve won this one too, fair and square, just like our first fight,” he gloated triumphantly, feeling smug with his victory. “You were careless, or perhaps, overconfident.”

“I was not careless,” she countered, her face turning a bright shade of red once again.

“Important lesson, wench, never take your eyes off your enemy. You could learn a thing or two from me, my lady,” he offered, “wouldn’t hurt, would it?”

Brienne didn’t answer, her enraged face only tempting him into provoking her further.

“Wasn’t it exactly like this the last time you were under me?” Jaime blurted before he could check his words.

“What?” she cried out, her flushed face an evidence that she, like him, had obviously been unable to get that encounter out of her head.
“I meant the last time we met in combat,” he made an attempt to correct his crude depiction of their last duel, knowing he had gone a bit too far.

“It would be good if we could focus on your swordplay than empty talk.”

“You know, wench,” he went on, ignoring her words and the incredible effect her body had on his, “that dress you’d donned last night--”

“What of it?” she demanded, ready for argument if he mocked her.

“You should wear more of those,” he suggested, recalling how well it went with her eyes.

“I’m tired of your--”

“I’m not mocking,” he cut her, his voice uncontrollably hoarse, as if it had stopped listening to his brain, “far from it.” He pushed into her, closing the gap between them, their bodies almost fused as one, each indiscernible from the other. “Blue is a colour that goes well on you, my lady,” he confessed his admiration, paying her his first and most sincere compliment so far, “it brings out your eyes.”

“We should get back to what we were supposed to be doing, Ser Jaime.” Breaking free of his gaze, she turned to her right, her fingers tightening around her sword as she deprived him of the closest view he’d ever had of those beautiful eyes.

“Isn’t this what we were supposed to be doing, Brienne?”

He bent further, until he could smell her, her warm breath, the scent of her freshly bathed skin mingled with the seductive odour of the beads of sweat glistening on them. He took in her pale freckled skin, her full lips, complete with the scar on them, her lovely eyelashes and her pink cheeks. His heart missed a beat and his cock twitched in expectation when she brought her lower lip between her teeth, gently biting it, leaving him wondering for a fleeting second what it would have felt like if those were his teeth instead of hers.

Drowning deeper and deeper into his trance, he tried to fight it, to break free of the invisible hold she seemed to have on him, but his resolve and his efforts bore no fruit, for he only found himself succumbing to this intoxication.

The solution to his predicament came in the way he least anticipated. “This--” she turned to him again, making eye contact, and with all the force she could muster, she shoved him off violently and turned them over “--is what we’re supposed to be doing.” Allowing him no time to comprehend what she’d said, she swiftly gained control of the situation, her arms holding his to the ground. To complete his defeat, her knees were on his legs, the full force of her body weight making it impossible for him to recover his lost advantage.

“Yield,” she whispered, her eyes on fire as she held the tip of her wooden stick to his throat, her knees digging painfully into his thighs.

“Alright,” he groaned, wishing she’d get off him, “I give up, now get the hell off me.” Blinded by the pain she was inflicting on him, he added, “If it’s not too much trouble, would you stop crushing me to death, my lady?”

She jumped to her feet at once, throwing out her hand to him as usual.

“I can stand up on my own.” Scowling, he got up with great difficulty, the pain in his thighs making him wonder if the area had turned blue, or worst still, a nasty shade of purple. “There was no need to
be this rough,” he complained, grimacing as he made a valiant effort to stand up straight without stumbling.

“No need to be rough?” she scoffed, readying herself to strike again. “How else am I supposed to train you? I’m helping you fight, not coaching you on how to dance!”

For a moment, Jaime forgot his pain. “Can you really dance?” he asked, astonished, for never in his mind’s eye had he pictured Brienne venturing into anything even remotely close to something as artistic and graceful as dancing.

There came a shadow upon her face, a sort of sadness as she seemed to have remembered something. “Of course I can dance,” she replied brusquely, avoiding his eyes, “my father ensured I learned everything girls my age were supposed to be well-versed with.”

“Did you dance with the boys your age?” he inquired, his interest piqued. He was hit by a sudden desire to know more about her, about what she was like when she was a young maid.

“No,” came her quick reply, “except--” she fell silent mid-sentence, leaving Jaime curious and desperate to hear the full story.

“Except?” he prompted, impatient for her to continue.

“Renly,” she said in such a small voice that he had to strain his ears to hear her.

Jaime’s eyes widened. “You danced with Renly Baratheon?” he shouted, unable to keep the surprise off his tone. “Really?”

The wench turned to him, her eyes blazing. “Go on,” she cried out defiantly, her voice choked, “mock me, make fun of it. You aren’t the first to be nasty to me, nor will you be the last.”

“I had absolutely no such intention, Brienne,” he said softly, hoping to convince her of his sincerity, “I don’t know why you feel I’m still out to taunt you--”

“We’d better carry on,” she diverted the subject, her tone once again crisp and formal.

And they began another round. She opened the attack again, this time with renewed vigour and a newly acquired vengeance, and he parried, dodging her, watching her eyes for mistakes she’d likely make. But she was alert as hell this time, never taking her eyes off him, never once offering him a chance to convert the threat that she was to him into an opportunity. Either she was too quick for him, or his left hand was too slow to respond to his brain because every time he thought of attacking her, he ended up a second behind her. A step ahead of him this time as well, she had him on the ground in his usual position, lying on his back with her sword-tip to his neck.

“That will be all for today,” she decided, drawing away and bringing their first session to an abruptly premature end. This time, however, she didn’t volunteer to help him up. “I should make a move,” she told him and promptly took off without another word, leaving him gaping after her, wondering what he’d done to offend her.

“Wench,” he called out, rushing up the stairs after her, “Brienne, wait, what have I done--”

Realizing that she was far ahead and out of earshot and there was no point talking anymore, he trudged along to the castle, brooding about the last hour or so, thinking of the best possible way to pacify her and get her on talking terms again.

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“Why so glum?” Tyrion’s voice broke into his thoughts, and only then did he realize that he had been toying with his food for a while with most of his meal sitting on his plate rather than ending up in his belly. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing,” he lied, wondering what was on Brienne’s mind. He hadn’t seen her all day, not even once after she’d walked out on him in a huff. While he was busy coping with his increased responsibilities as Lord Commander, his day’s schedule had left him with barely any time to inquire after her. Dinner with Tyrion now seemed to be a daily affair, and at his brother’s insistence he’d sent a man to invite her to join them, only to be turned down by an excuse that she wasn’t well and would like to rest.

“It has to be something,” Tyrion prodded him, “I’ve never seen you in such a pensive mood all your life.”

“I’m just tired,” he came up with an excuse, hiding the truth again.

“Is your bad mood the effect of your training?” Tyrion grinned. “Have you been reduced to the sad little boy beaten at the hands of a girl?” he teased good-naturedly.

Jaime gritted his teeth, his mind furiously working on a fitting retort, but he severely lacked in that area, particularly when it was his snarky brother at the other end. “Shut up, Tyrion,” was the only feeble objection he could manage.

Tyrion laughed out loud this time. “Speaking of your wife,” he went on, “why hasn’t she joined us?”

“You did wed her in a Sept, didn’t you?” Tyrion continued his verbal onslaught, unfazed by his brother’s infuriated reaction, “you said the vows, so—”

“So what?” Jaime roared, “vows aren’t enough to make a marriage.”

Tyrion sat back in his chair, his arms crossed against his chest as he fixed Jaime with a pointed gaze. “Tell me then.”

Jaime was lost for a moment. “Tell you what?”

“What does it take to make a marriage?” The smile was gone and his brother was all earnestness when he leaned forward, looking at him with utmost curiosity.

“You’ve been married longer than me,” Jaime tried to evade him by throwing the question back to him, “you should know better.”

“Oh, you do know that my marriage was a far worse circumstantial necessity than yours,” Tyrion said, “she barely even talks to me, leave alone look upon me her husband.”

“I’m not Brienne’s husband either,” Jaime clarified, leaving no room for misunderstanding with his brother. “I’m planning to get this marriage annulled soon.”

“And how exactly do you plan to do that without confiding in father,” Tyrion demanded, reminding Jaime of the second-biggest hurdle in his path after Cersei. “Worse still, how are you going to keep your little secret from Cersei? What happens if she comes to know?”

“I hope Brienne will be long gone before Cersei comes to know,” Jaime mused, recalling his sour conversation with Cersei, “she’s already beginning to doubt there’s something going on between
Brienne and me.”

“Did she confront you?” Tyrion was blunt and to the point. “Is that why you’re disturbed?”

“That’s--that’s one of the reasons,” Jaime caved in, mentally admiring Tyrion’s uncanny ability to read people. “She’s quite bitter about Brienne being here.”

“That’s just Cersei being Cersei,” said Tyrion dismissively. “Is she the reason you’re wearing this golden abomination?” he asked, eyeing his hand with disgust.

“She had Qyburn specially design it for me,” Jaime explained, hating the attachment as much as Tyrion. “She wanted me to put it on because she felt it would be better to hide my--” his face flushed with shame “--disability.”

Tyrion shook his head. “Why do you even bother listening to Cersei?”

“Because I love her,” Jaime spontaneously said. But for the first time he doubted the credibility of his declaration, his conviction and his feelings for his sister.

“So you do?” Tyrion was quick to note the unrest in his mind.

“I must leave,” said Jaime, wanting to avoid this tedious discussion. The last thing he needed was another sleepless night staring pointlessly at the ceiling.

“What’s the other reason for your unease?” Leaning forward, Tyrion refilled his goblet, looking at Jaime with unmistakable interest.

“That’s nothing important,” Jaime dismissed him again having no inclination, whatsoever, to confide in him that he’d upset Brienne. He prepared to call it a night, wiping his hands. “I have to leave, it’s quite late.”

“Alright, if you don’t wish to tell me, I won’t push you further.” Relieved, Jaime was about to get up, when Tyrion stopped him again. “But you’re yet to answer me, brother. What, according to you, makes a marriage?”

“Trust,” replied Jaime thoughtfully, sinking into his chair again, knowing full well that his brother wouldn’t let him go quietly if he refused to oblige him with an answer, “belief in her, accepting her for who she is and embracing both her strengths and her shortcomings--” he paused for a second “--and most of all, giving her the confidence that she could always turn to me, giving her a reason to spend her life with me, showing her that I am truly hers in every possible way.”

“Hmm.” Tyrion seemed to ponder his words for a moment. “So which of these did you go back on, Jaime?”

“Mine isn’t even a real marriage--” Jaime began, but then all of a sudden it hit him, his mis-step striking him like a bolt of lightning as it dawned on him where he had gone wrong.

“I should leave.” Springing to his feet hurriedly, he turned to bolt out of there when Tyrion stopped him again.

“You’ll probably need the wine,” he offered, pushing a jug and a couple of goblets in his direction. “A little drink always helps ease difficult conversations.”

Grabbing them in his arms, Jaime turned on his heel and dashed away when he heard Tyrion call out, “Happy to have been of assistance, brother.”
Jaime raced up the stairs, doubling his pace, hoping to get to her sooner than he could. How could he have been such an idiot? His surprise when she’d confessed that she was proficient in dancing, his astonishment when he learned that she’d danced with Renly… no wonder she’d concluded that he’d been mocking her. Disbelief at her being associated with anything remotely feminine was enough to touch a nerve, particularly when it came to him. All he’d done in the last year was ridicule her for being a woman, he’d insulted her incessantly while she’d swallowed them, everything about him reminding her of the cruel boys she’d grown up with, the ones who’d made her life hell.

And Renly…

How could he have been so naive as to overlook the fact that the prettiest, but most useless Baratheon was the most sensitive subject as far as Brienne was concerned. While he couldn’t believe that the wench could’ve fallen for an insipid character such as him, the least he could’ve done as a friend would’ve been to respect her feelings for him, and not bring it up frequently in such a flippant way, his behaviour akin to cutting open a raw wound and sprinkling salt into it.

Is she still in love with him? What the fuck does she see in him? And how the hell does the pretty boy have an effect this powerful on her even after his death?

A part of him desperately wished to learn the answer to these, but didn’t know how to find out without being tactless and hurting her again.

“Wench,” he called out, pounding on her door, “let me in. I want to speak to you.”

No answer.

“Brienne,” he shouted again, this time using her name for better effect, “I know you’re awake, so open the door and let me in. I promise I won’t take much of your time.”

The continued silence was now beginning to kill him.

Jaime began attacking the door again. “Brienne, please--”

This time the door sprang open and the wench stood in front of him dressed in a simple shirt and trousers for the night.

“Can I come in?” he asked, trying not to stare at her long neck that glowed in the pale candlelight, her skin smooth and supple. Without waiting for an answer, he slipped past her and made his way to the table, placing the contents of his arms on it.

“What can I do for you, Ser Jaime?” she asked, her tone as formal as ever.

He downed an entire glass in one go, seeking the much-needed courage to confess his mistake and apologize for it. “Why are you angry with me, wench?”
“I’m not angry,” she replied evasively, staring at the liquid in her hands.

He refilled his glass. “You’ve avoided me the whole day. You didn’t join us for dinner.”

“I--” she seemed to search for an excuse. “I was tired, decided to have an early night.”

“It’s quite late and you’re far from asleep now,” he said, “why have you been keeping away from me?”

“You’re upset,” he went on when she was silent.

“I’m not--”

“I’m sorry,” he finally got the words out of his mind, “I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did when you mentioned that you danced with Renly.”

Brienne sighed, drinking deeply before she spoke. “It had nothing to do with you.”

“Then?”

“It’s just that I was reminded of yet another story of my youth about how I was insulted,” she said dismissively, “I’m sure it’ll be of no interest to you.”

“Of all the boys around you, Renly was the only one kind to you,” he threw in a guess, trying to read her expression.

She stopped drinking. “How do you know?”

“I surmised it,” he admitted with a smile, “tell me more about yourself, Brienne, I want to know.” When her expression darkened, he added with haste, “I really do. Trust me.”

“It was my name day,” she began with a distant smile, “and when all the boys competed with each other to dance with me, I was flattered.”

“And then?”

Pain filled her eyes and the smile disappeared. “It turned out that they were only playing a joke on me, a cruel game--” she sniffed at the memory, pushing down the agony it seemed to have awoken in her “until Renly stepped in to dance with me.”

“Was that when you fell in love with him?” Jaime couldn’t help asking, for the only time in his life appreciating something the good-for-nothing king had done.

Brienne nodded, smiling again. “I decided to dedicate my life to him knowing full well that I could never have him.”

He didn’t deserve you, Jaime almost told her, but contained himself on time.

“He danced with me that day,” she went on dreamily, “no man ever had before him and no one ever will.”

“Don’t assume things about the future, Brienne,” Jaime told her, suddenly distracted by a mental image of him dancing with her.

Brienne huffed a laugh. “No man will ever dance with me again, Ser Jaime,” she said, her voice calm and resigned, “that was a lovely dream, and that is what it will remain.”
“Are you still in love with Renly?” he blurted, cursing himself for the bluntness in his tone the moment the words shot out of his lips.

She gave him no answer, but only coloured in response, and that irked Jaime to no end.

“You’re blushing,” he confronted her, frowning, “which means you--”

“I care for him,” she hastily interrupted, uncomfortable with the accusation.

“That doesn’t answer my question, Brienne,” he pressed, his frustration mounting.

“That’s all the answer you’re going to get, Ser Jaime,” she deflected him just like the last time he’d thrown a tricky question at her.

Knowing that this was the end of the subject, he decided to let it be, realizing that he was thoroughly incapable of squeezing a straight answer out of her. And that bothered him more, increased his restlessness, his head pounding due to the alcohol in his blood along with his heart that decided to give it company.

Another sip of wine later he knew what to do, although he hoped his rising nervousness would be kind enough to let go of him and allow him to do his heart’s bidding. Throwing all caution to the wind, he got to his feet and held out his hand to her.

She looked completely nonplussed, looking alternately at his hand and his face.

“May I have this dance with you, my lady?” he summoned the courage to ask her.

“What?”

Her bewildered look nearly put him off, but he was determined to go all the way. “I’m asking you to dance with me,” he made himself clear for her benefit.

“This is ridiculous!” she exclaimed. “This is neither the time nor the place--”

“I’m no Renly,” he beat down her rejection, “but I can be--” he searched his head for the right word “--myself, and I’m not that bad a dancer either,” he said, giving her his best smile.

“You’re drunk, and--”

“Come on,” he urged, itching to hold her hand.

She thought for a moment and then succumbed, placing her hand in his. When she rose to her feet, he pulled her into his arms, his alcohol ridden brain refusing to think straight or instruct him about what to do next.

Her eyes widened when she realized how close they were. “That’s not how Renly did it--”

“I’m not Renly,” he reminded her again, his throat dry and his voice unnaturally husky as he was mildly hurt by the repeated comparison with the man who wasn’t even half as capable of him. His stump securely wound around her waist, he tried to keep calm, hoping that his unsteady knees wouldn’t give way.

Her eyes latched on to his and he took a step backward, unsure of what to do, not knowing how or where to begin, for he too hadn’t danced with anyone for years. She followed his move, but took a step too wide and stumbled, tripping on his foot as she lost her balance.
“I’ve got you, wench,” he whispered, supporting her back to her feet and steadying her.

“I’m so clumsy and ungainly that I can’t even do something as normal as this,” she lamented, disappointment ruining the usual sparkle in her eyes as she clutched his shoulder to balance herself, “I don’t deserve to dance with anyone.”

“You’re just drunk,” he consoled her, “maybe another day, maybe when we’re both in our senses.” But instead of letting her go, he continued to hold her close, his hand still grasping hers tightly.

She shook her head. “I’m no lady,” she said sadly.

“You are,” he said hoarsely, bringing her hand to his lips and planting a tender kiss on her knuckles, “my lady.” His eyes fixed on her in an intense gaze, he let his lips linger on her skin for as long as she’d permit it, for as long as decency would allow.

She didn’t take his eyes off him either, and for a while their staring game went on, neither of them ready to look away despite both of them being visibly uncomfortable with the situation they’d landed themselves in.

“You should probably leave,” she said at last, breathing heavily, but making no attempt to pull away.

Logic flowing into his severely confounded brain again, he shook off the influence of the wine and released her. “Maybe I should,” he murmured, stepping away and putting a respectable distance between them before he could lose control and end up doing something inappropriate.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning at training,” he heard her say when he stormed out of her room.

Jaime had no idea how to find his way back to his chambers, nor did he realize how he’d reached there in spite of his inebriated state, but the moment he walked in, he dragged himself to the bed and sat at the edge, allowing himself to mull over what had just transpired. On the one hand he was thankful that he’d done nothing he’d regret later, while on the other, he berated himself for not listening to the little voice inside him, a deep corner of him that nudged him a step closer to the wench every time he saw her.

What the fuck’s wrong with me?

He had to push himself to focus, to control that tiny voice that steadily seemed to mislead him. He had to get his priorities sorted out before it was too late. Cersei’s the one who deserves my attention, he kept telling himself, only Cersei. He repeated the same thing over and over again as he undressed, preparing for yet another sleepless night to come.

Chapter End Notes

Edited to add a few more tags.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

As Jaime begins to drift away from Cersei, he gets closer and closer to the wench...

“Stop resisting, bitch,” Locke snarled, grabbing her arm while one of his thugs ran his filthy hands over her waist, groping around for her breeches, “if you’d prefer to be left alone in one piece unlike your golden boy, just give us what we want and let us all return home, satisfied. I’m sure your daddy will be glad to have you back intact.”

“He’s not my golden boy,” Brienne spat, “and I’d rather die than let you violate me.”

“The Kingslayer left you at my mercy,” Locke sniggered, eyeing her in the dirtiest possible way a woman could be looked at, “he’s not going to return for you--”

“I don’t expect him to,” she growled, struggling against her restraints, “he and I were meant to go separate ways.”

“He’s no better than us,” said her captor, inching his lips so close to hers that she could smell his putrid breath, “given a chance, he’d have fucked you and left you for his precious sister.”

“He’d never do that,” she shouted, “he’s worth a thousand of you. He--”

“Shut up, you whore,” Locke silenced her, pinning her to the pole, “it’s time I put an end to your nonsense and had some fun.”

“No,” she screamed, wanting to achieve the satisfaction of hurting him by biting a chunk off his cheek as he came closer, but all she felt was emptiness, thin air as she lunged to grab her assailants face.

The next moment she found herself in bed, alone - no Locke, no rapists, no one else. Relief washed over her when she realized that it was just another of her recurring nightmares. Breathing laboriously, she tried to shake it off, coming to terms with the fact that she’d have to deal with these horrors by herself, that Jaime wouldn’t be around her all the time to hold and comfort her.

Her head feeling as if a thousand hammers were pounding on it all at once, she remembered the cause to be her excessive alcohol intake last night, and with it came flooding the memories of her strange, but memorable meeting with Jaime, the experience having left her feeling both awkward and cared-for. It had affected her to such an extent that she’d tossed and turned in bed long after he’d left, sleepless, her mind full of visions of an actual dance with him... visions that had gradually assumed the form of dreams, the sweetest she’d ever dreamed.

That was until the nightmares took over, and Jaime morphed into Locke and his monsters.

Jaime’s not really my husband, she forced herself to embrace reality whilst blushing furiously when she remembered the way he’d held her the last time the nightmares haunted her, he’s--

She couldn’t conclude what he was, her thoughts abruptly broken into by loud incessant bangs on her door. Who could it be this late and what would they want from her? Better to be safe than sorry,
she decided, picking up an empty candle stand that stood on her bedside table. The knocks continued as she slowly tiptoed down to the door. Noiselessly shifting the latch open, she took a deep breath before she made her next move.

Swinging the door open, she flung her weapon at the intruder without even bothering to check who her untimely visitor was.

“Oww,” cried a familiar angry voice and what followed was a string of the choicest curses she’d ever heard, leaving Brienne frozen to the spot when she realized her blunder. “That was the last thing I expected, wench!” hissed Jaime, his eyes blazing as droplets of blood trickled down his face.

“Ser Jaime,” she gasped, panic gripping her as she took in his bleeding forehead. “I’m extremely sorry,” she hurriedly apologized, grabbing his hand and pulling him in. “I--”

“Do you attack all your visitors like this,” he asked between clenched teeth, “or is this something special you’ve particularly reserved for me? I knew there was a violent streak in you, but I’d never imagined to end up becoming an unfortunate target of it.”

“I didn’t know it was you,” she explained, praying that the cut wasn’t too deep as she itched to take charge and sort out the wound. But she dared not touch it without his consent. “What the hell were you thinking, knocking on my door in the dead of the night?” she accused him instead.

Denying her the privilege of an answer, he fixed her with an unblinking look. Once he’d calmed down, he spoke again, “Are you planning to hold my hand all night?” he asked mischievously, gently running his thumb over her knuckles. “People will talk--”

“Oh, shut your mouth,” she cried out, immediately jerking her hand away. Unable to find a response fitting enough to be thrown at him, she said no more, but to her horror, realized that cheeks were hot and her knees were shaking.

“All I did was ask you for a dance, my lady,” Jaime continued teasing her, his eyes twinkling, “little did I know that an innocent act like this would warrant a revenge as severe as the one I’ve been subjected to.” If he was still drunk, it didn’t show, for it seemed from his speech and gait that the effect of last night’s wine had certainly worn off.

Brienne had to suppress a smile at his outrageously dramatic response. “You’re a knight, Ser Jaime,” she reminded him, fighting to keep a straight face, “I’m sure you can deal with little injuries like this.”

“Little injuries?” He looked at her with wide eyes that screamed innocence. “I might bleed to death--”

“Come here.” Dragging him to a chair, she fetched a cloth and a basin of water. “It’s just a shallow cut,” she observed, settling down to clean the wound once he was seated.

“Why did you hit me?” He looked up, directing his eyes at hers.

“Why did you knock on my door at such an odd hour?” she reiterated her question, curious to find out.

“Why did you scream?”

“It--” she began, wanting to confess to him, but on second thoughts, she decided to hold back, unwilling to come across as needy or desperate. She’d hate to accept it, but a small part of her wished to be comforted by him again, craving for his reassuring words and his soothing touch, something
she couldn’t afford to want or get used to, for she was merely a guest in his life, a means to an end, one that had to be done away with when the end result had been achieved. “I got up to get some water, tripped in the darkness and fell,” she lied, pushing away his question and resolving to keep the matter to herself.

“You tripped and fell?” His palm enclosed her hand that was busy with his wound, preventing her from doing whatever she was. “Do you take me to be that naive, wench?”

“I never said that,” she replied sullenly.

His features softened. “Was it a nightmare, Brienne?”

She nodded, troubled by his touch more than her actual problem.

“I thought so,” he muttered, his jaw tightening in rage. “If only I get a chance to run into those cunts again—”

“There’s no point brooding about the past,” she said with a sigh, reassuring herself more than him, “this is my incapable mind which is unable to come to terms with it. I have no choice, but to deal with it—”

“You don’t have to face it alone,” he immediately said, an odd expression taking over his face, “I’m here for you, you can count on me.”

“What do you mean?” She found herself short of breath when his fingers curled over hers, enveloping her hand in a tight grasp.

“I mean—” Jaime started, but let go of her hand immediately, looking as flustered as her. “If you want Qyburn to give you something to sleep, I can tell him to come and take a look at you.”

“That won’t be necessary,” she politely declined his offer before going on to something else that was eating into her for a while, “You still haven’t answered me,” she reminded him, “what were you doing outside my door at this hour?”

“I wasn’t exactly lurking outside your door,” he admitted, lowering his tone. “My chambers are not far away, and when I heard you scream, I sensed something was wrong. I was worried about you.”

“I—I don’t know what to say,” she mumbled, “thank you,” No one had ever shown her such genuine concern before and the concept being strange to her, it was too good to come to terms with.

But to her surprise, he looked irritated. “Will you stop being so formal, Brienne?” he snapped. “This time, you have nothing to thank me for—”

“You’re right,” she sheepishly replied, “I owe you an apology—” she took her hand off the wound which had now stopped bleeding “—for what I’ve done to you.”

“You almost killed me, wench,” he reverted to his theatrical tone again, “like you did yesterday when we duelled—”

“That was a wooden sword,” she countered in disbelief.

“Thanks to you my ass ended up quite sore,” he grumbled, grimacing. “Do you know how much I had to tend to it? I had to take special care to make sure—”

“I don’t need details,” she cut him, trying to ward off the alarming images of his backside that had
begun popping up in her mind, distracting her by taking her back to that fateful bath they had shared when she’d had a glorious view of all of him. She began wiping the wound with a dry cloth, forcing herself to think of something else.

“I remember the little cuts and scrapes I suffered as a boy,” he went on, staring dreamily at the ceiling, refusing to deviate from the subject of his injuries, “and mother used to clean them up just like you’re doing now.” He exhaled deeply, his warm breath filling her nostrils, the effect as intoxicating as the wine she’d consumed last night. “She’d tenderly kiss the wound--” he lowered his face to meet her eyes, his handsome features and the intensity of his gaze sending her into a trance powerful enough to make her forget the presence of everything but the two of them “--and the pain would just magically disappear,” he whispered, “the kiss definitely the best part of the treatment.”

Her eyes widening, a shiver ran down her spine when he said this and she faltered, her fingers fumbling with the cloth she held to his wound.

“I--I didn’t mean it that way,” Jaime stuttered, red patches appearing on his cheeks, drawing her attention to his sharp jawline, which, for the first time, she was treated to a proper glimpse of, now that he was clean-shaven. “I didn’t exactly ask you to--” he paused, looking away from her.

Of course he didn’t mean it, Brienne told herself, cursing her wild imagination for stupidly assuming it to be otherwise. “I know,” she hastily cut in before he could say anything, shuddering to think how she might have reacted if he had actually meant what he’d said. “And you’re fine now,” she decided to put an end to this shaky conversation, “until the maester examines you, at least.” Taking her hand off, she stepped aside, hoping she hadn’t gaped too blatantly at his flawless face.

“Thank you,” he said with such sincerity that her heart melted, “no one except my mother has done something like this for me.”

Abashed, Brienne lowered her gaze. “I’m sure your sister--”

“Not even Cersei,” he admitted with a hint of sad longing in his voice, almost as if this were his wishful thinking.

“I’m sure one day she will,” she made an attempt to comfort him, unable to fathom the strange emptiness that struck her when she pictured Cersei showering him with such affection.

“I should leave,” he decided abruptly, jumping to his feet.

Relieved, she welcomed the prospect of solitude. She needed some time away from the man who managed to successfully achieve both - infuriate her as well as warm her heart, the alternation of these contrasting emotions beyond her ability to deal with the conflict. “I’ll see you later, Ser Jaime.” She made for the door, expecting him to follow her, only to find him still standing by the chair when she turned to him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, hoping his lingering by her side had nothing to do with his injury. “I thought you were leaving.”

“I thought I did too,” he answered vaguely, casting her a strange look, “until something occurred to me.”

“What?” she prompted, hoping it wasn’t something tricky or awkward.

“Why don’t we go for a walk, wench?” he suggested with a bright smile.

“Now?” she almost shouted.
“Keep your voice down,” he hissed, “I don’t want people to know I’m here and jump into unsavoury conclusions.”

“It’s not dawn yet—”

“The sun will rise in a while.” Drawing the curtains, he peeped out of the window. “Our little encounter has ensured the end of my sleep, and if I’m not mistaken, you’re wide awake too.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea because I—” she stopped, her search for a convincing excuse to evade his company coming to a fruitless end.

“You seem quite eager to avoid me all the time,” he said, reading her mind accurately. “I never knew you still found my presence so obnoxious.” He sounded a little hurt.

“It’s not that,” she quickly corrected him. Far from that, actually, she realized, worried that too much of his presence around her might create problems for her.

Jaime raised his brows, keenly watching her reaction. “Then?”

“I’ll accompany you,” she relented, deciding that complying with his request would save her the trouble of answering his difficult questions. “Give me a few minutes while I change.”

“Meet me downstairs,” he instructed her and left her alone once more while she sank on the bed, allowing herself a few moments to gather her thoughts.

She then changed into a shirt that was more presentable and breeches that could be worn in public as against the trousers she’d worn for the night, and when dressed, she left the room, tiptoeing along the corridors and out into the open where the sun was just beginning to show itself.

As he had promised, Jaime was waiting for her at the base of the stairs, his face hidden so that the guards wouldn’t recognize him.

“Much better,” he groaned in relief, pushing the hood off his head and taking a deep breath to inhale the cool morning breeze as soon as they were some distance away from the guards. “Nothing like a morning walk to rejuvenate the senses. The early sunlight and fresh air makes me come alive.”

“Whatsoever you say,” she blindly agreed, distracted by the way his golden locks reflected the first rays of dawn, making him look every bit the lion he was by name.

He stopped in his tracks. “You look lost.” He caught her unawares, once again painfully impeccable in his observation. “Still thinking about Renly?”

Renly was the last thing on her mind, but, under no circumstances was she ready to admit it to him. “It’s none of your concern,” she deliberately evaded him.

“You can do better than him,” he jumped at her in response, his tone taking on an irritable edge.

“Better in what sense?” She found herself encouraging the conversation despite her efforts to remain vague.

“You deserve someone who values you, wench, and accepts you for who you are, not someone who—”

“I’m not an idiot,” she barked, knowing what was coming next, “I knew he liked Loras Tyrell, but that doesn’t wipe out the kindness he did me.”
“You’re right,” he tried to make amends at once, his tone a lot less severe than it had been when he’d mentioned Renly, “I shouldn’t have insulted him without provocation. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“It’s quite alright,” she told him, determined to change the subject this time. “Where are we going?”

“There’s a place I’d like to show you,” he gave her a vague answer as they walked on. “Here we are,” he said a minute later, leading her into what appeared to be a Godswood of sorts.

“And there she is,” said Brienne, her eyes falling on Sansa who appeared to be praying at a distance.

“Yes, there she is.” Jaime pulled her aside so that they’d be out of her sight.

Brienne turned to him. “You promised to get her out of this hell, I’m still waiting—”

“I’m working on it,” he quickly assured her, but the way he avoided her eyes told her that he’d thought of nothing yet.

“I thought you were a man of your word,” she said sadly, hurt that he was on the verge of breaking her trust, “that you’d—”

“I am,” he cut in with a fierce look, this time his eyes piercing hers, “I made you a promise. I’m going to keep that promise.”

Brienne believed him. She didn’t know why, only that she did. “How? And when?”

“I haven’t thought of anything yet,” he spoke the truth this time. “She’s my sister-in-law, so whatever move I make, I’d have to do it with care and proper planning. Give me time until Joffrey’s wedding,” he requested her.

I trust you, Ser Jaime, I know you won’t let me down… She nodded, his word good enough for her as usual.

“About last night,” he slowly began as they walked back once Sansa had left, “I--” he paused, reddening, “I was drunk, my lady, and while I had the best intentions at heart, I hope I haven’t breached an invisible line or crossed the limits of decency.”

“You haven’t,” she assured him with a smile.

“Thank the gods!” he exclaimed, breaking into a wide grin. But the next second, the smile was off his face. Abruptly coming to a halt, he looked into her eyes, giving her one of those looks that had the power to make any maiden swoon in his arms. “I wasn’t joking about that dance, wench,” he whispered, “I owe you one and I’m going to make sure you get one.” He fell silent again and after a long pause, he added, “Someday.”

“But, Ser Jaime, I don’t think that’s possible,” was all she could say.

He looked unfazed, his eyes shining with steely resolve. “You have my word, Brienne.”

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“I never thought you’d be here before me, Ser Jaime.” Brienne was surprised to find him at their secret location well ahead of their decided time. “What motivated you to show up this early?”

Jaime, however, didn’t answer, unabashedly staring at her as she approached him. “You’re wearing a dress,” he remarked, ignoring her question as his eyes travelled along her body, absorbing her from head to toe.
“I had to,” she replied, smoothening her gown consciously, his wandering gaze flooding her with nervousness.

“I’m glad you took my advice,” he said appreciatively.

“It had nothing to do with that,” she hastily corrected him, “I’m due to meet Lady Olenna and Lady Margaery after we’re done here, so I thought I might as well be dressed appropriately--”

“Whatsoever be the reason--” a few steps later he was too close to her for comfort “--I’m happy to see that you’re wearing blue.”

“Septa Donyse picked it for me,” she blurted, his proximity clouding her thinking and drenching her palms with sweat, “along with a few others. She told me that it went well with my eyes,” she babbled on.

“Did she?” said Jaime, sounding amused. “Well, I’m glad she concurs with my opinion.”

“Shall we begin?” she asked, her throat oddly dry, her voice sounding as raucous as a toad’s.

But Jaime was in his own world and didn’t even seem to register her intent. “Begin what?” A moment later, he quickly jerked his eyes away from her. “Umm--yes.” Picking up his tourney sword, he readied himself to face her.

A couple of days had gone by since their drunken encounter, and life was seemingly back to normal, but Brienne was far from over it, the memory haunting her from time to time, leaving her flustered at all the wrong moments, the visions standing out in her head and disrupting her mental stability when she least expected it. Their training continued every day, and with each session increased the instances of their accidental physical contact. Having spent considerable time in Renly’s guard, touching men wasn’t new to her, but with Jaime, it was different. Every brush against him, every time their fingers touched or their limbs tangled as they wrestled each other to the ground, all of it was nothing but pure torture.

Today was no different. While Jaime had shown a shade of improvement since she’d first begun with him and she was proud of his achievements against her, this morning turned out to be her worst nightmare ever. That she was in a dress and that Jaime had made special note of it bothered her to such an extent, that twice in a row she was disarmed, both his victories the result of her restless mind.

“Yield,” he growled when he’d knocked the weapon off her hand for the third time that fateful morning.

Giving in with a sigh, she raised a hand in surrender, for the last thing she wanted was for him to pin her to the ground with his body like their first time.

“Something’s wrong,” he said when they sat down on the ledge, panting, “you’re never this sloppy.”

“I wasn’t sloppy,” she leapt up in feeble defence of herself, “just--”

“--distracted?” he supplied, “I can see that. There’s no other way I could’ve taken you down this easily.”

“You’re improving, it’s good progress,” she tried to compliment him in a desperate attempt to hide her distress, “I’m not surprised--”

“I’m shocked you haven’t knocked my ass to the ground even once today.” He passed her the skin
of water, watching her as she drank deeply. “What’s bothering you? If it’s Sansa, I assure you—”

“What about our marriage?” she asked, glad to be handed a topic to discuss.

“I’m going to appeal to the High Septon for an annulment soon,” he promised her, “and you’ll be free of the bond. I’m just worried about how to break the news to my father.”

“Why would he object to your decision?” Brienne wanted to know, perplexed by his predicament. In her opinion, Tywin Lannister would only be too happy to get rid of her, for she was anything but a suitable wife for his golden son and heir.

“He may not,” said Jaime thoughtfully, but didn’t seem too sure of it.

“I don’t see why he’d approve of me as your wife—”

“You don’t know my father, Brienne,” Jaime told her with a wry smile. “He desperately wishes for me to marry and succeed him as the Lord of Casterly Rock. You’re a noblewoman, equal to me in all respects, and in his eyes—” he sighed deeply before continuing “—an ideal match for me, a woman good enough to bear my children.”

“No,” she objected, appalled at the prospect of Tywin confining her to Casterly Rock, while blushing furiously at the same time when she pictured herself surrounded by half a dozen Lannister heirs.

“I know,” he agreed, “which is why I’m wondering how best to end our marriage.”

“Let’s hope you come up with something soon,” she said, getting up to leave.

“Is it so bad?” he asked, not bothering to set the context for his question.

Brienne halted. “What is?”

“Being my wife.”

“I have nothing against you in particular—” she flushed, remembering her oath to Lady Catelyn and her priorities in life “—it’s just that I’m not cut out for marriage or family life.”

“I’m pretty certain you’d have wed Renly had he asked you years ago,” he said, fixing her with a pointed stare. “So why not someone else if you had the chance?” He quickly added, “I’m not talking about myself, but there’s a possibility you might stumble upon love again—”

“There’s no point talking about something that’s never going to happen,” she dismissed his claim, wanting nothing more than to get out of there.

“That’s not an answer to my question, Brienne,” he refused to let go.

“That’s the only answer you’re going to get, Ser Jaime,” she put him off, indicating the end of the conversation as she made her way to the stairs.

“Brienne, wait,” he called out again, charging ahead to keep up with her.

She waited for him to catch up, and when he did, he reached for her face. Common sense told her to back away, but impulse and an inner voice she usually ignored urged her to let him approach her and do as he pleased. Her pulse quickened when his fingertips brushed against her forehead, restoring a lock of hair that had gone astray back to its place, his fingers caressing her damp skin long after he’d achieved what he had set out to do. “Much better now, though I’d suggest you wash your face and
straighten your dress before you go.”

“Why?” she mouthed, her voice lower than a whisper as she suddenly found it difficult to breathe.

Jaime looked her up and down. “Your face is red and sweaty and your hair disheveled and clothes askew. You certainly can’t show up in Lady Olenna’s presence looking like this… like you’ve been freshly--” he held his tongue, colouring deeply.

“--freshly what?” she asked, regretting her curiosity the moment the words escaped her lips.

“Freshly out of a duel,” he rasped, sliding his fingers down her cheeks and off her face. “You must leave at once, unless you want to turn up late and incur the old woman’s wrath. She can be quite caustic with her tongue, I’ve heard, worse than me, in fact.”

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“I never thought I’d run into you here.”

Dropping his conversation mid-way, Jaime turned to his brother. “And what brings you to the armoury?” he asked, equally puzzled to find Tyrion here.

“I’m here to collect my new axe,” said Tyrion, looking at the assistant who was taking down Jaime’s specifications, “if I may have it.”

“In a minute, m’lord,” said the lad who appeared to be the only one around that day, “the moment I finish with his--” he looked at Jaime “--order, I’ll fetch your axe.”

“What are you here for?” Tyrion inquired curiously, much to Jaime’s growing discomfort.

“An armour for myself,” Jaime lied, hoping his nosy brother would stop asking questions.

“M’lord,” the assistant addressed Jaime, “would you mind repeating the lady’s bust measurements?”
His eyes shining with a dangerous combination of amusement and mischief, Tyrion made no comment of the interesting exchange unfolding before him, but the look he gave his brother spoke volumes, eliminating the need for snarky words. “He asked you something, brother,” Tyrion prompted him, putting on a serious face, “what might the lady’s bust measurements be?”

With a glare specially directed towards his brother, Jaime mumbled the details to the shop assistant, his cheeks aflame with embarrassment.

“Are you sure the lady can’t make it for the fitting?” the boy asked him. “How correct is your judgement?”

“I’m sure it’s perfect,” Tyrion chimed in before Jaime could respond, “he does know the lady quite well, my boy, so don’t you worry about the accuracy of the measurements.”

“That will be all,” Jaime announced his departure, grinding his teeth.

“Thank you,” Tyrion said cheerfully when the boy handed him his axe, “and here’s the rest of the payment,” he added, throwing a bag of gold to him. “Come on, brother.” Jaime eyed him as if he’d devour him alive when they made their way out and into the Street of Steel.

“I’m certain that wasn’t for Cersei,” Tyrion began as they began walking back to the keep.

“Why do you feign ignorance when you know everything?” Jaime fumed.

“Why are you in disguise and what made you come here on foot?” Tyrion inquired, eyeing the cloak that was supposed to conceal his identity.

“I’m not obliged to answer you.” Jaime maintained a defiant stand, still miffed that his annoying little brother had stumbled upon his secret.

“Very well, not here then,” Tyrion conceded, “join me for a drink as soon as we get home.”

“I don’t want to--”

“Trust me, Jaime,” he said soothingly, “I have nothing but your best interests at heart.”

They made the rest of the journey in peace, neither of them talking until they were safely back in the confines and privacy of Tyrion’s chambers.

“Tell me,” Tyrion began again, setting a glass of wine in front of him, “what leaves you so disturbed and forlorn?”

“I’m not disturbed,” Jaime bluffed, albeit unconvincingly.

“Hmm.” It didn’t look like Tyrion believed him, but he kept off the matter for the time being.

They drank in silence for a while.

“That armour is for her, isn’t it?” Tyrion once again attempted conversation.

“So what if it is?”

“Ah, a wedding present then,” surmised his brother with a sly grin, “you’re so thoughtful, keeping your wife’s taste in mind while choosing a gift for her.”

“Will you stop doing that?” Jaime shouted, agitated by the incessant teasing. “You do know that this
“I know,” Tyrion intervened before he could finish, “but what I fail to understand is what is stopping you from honouring this marriage.”

“We’re cut out for different paths in life,” Jaime admitted, choosing not to lie this time, “she’s sworn to the Starks while I--”

“--carry on being Cersei’s puppet,” finished Tyrion, scowling at him. “Why?”

“Because I love Cersei,” said Jaime at once, “I’m loyal to her. I haven’t been with another woman, not even in her absence, nor will I ever--”

“One would expect reciprocity in a relationship, don’t you think?” Tyrion butted in again, forcibly inflicting his thoughts upon him.

“What do you mean?” Jaime was curious to know his brother’s mind despite the anger rising in him. “Of course she loves me.”

“I’m talking about loyalty. They’re two different things, Jaime.” Setting his drink aside, Tyrion focussed his complete attention on him. “When you were away, Cersei stooped to the extent of seeking comfort elsewhere--”

“What do you mean?” Jaime barked, his pulse rising.

Tyrion was as calm as ever. “She bedded Lancel--”

“I’ve heard those foul rumours,” Jaime was determined to brush the matter aside, “I choose to trust her than believe in the nonsense deliberately constructed to defame her--”

“Foul, no doubt, but nonsense it is not. What you’ve heard are far from rumours,” Tyrion asserted with confidence, “I’ve had a word with cousin Lancel myself. I know it is true.”

His first impulse being to choke the life out of his cousin, despair and revulsion filled Jaime once the initial bout of rage had ebbed away. But he knew better than to open his mouth, for anything he said in defence of Cersei would only invite his brother’s snark and criticism.

“You also ought to know that she ensured Sansa was mis-treated,” Tyrion went on, “Joffrey and our sister have taken every possible effort to leave her teary-eyed and miserable at every available opportunity.” Jaime could sense the bitterness towards Cersei in Tyrion’s voice when he spoke about Sansa.

“You’re just exaggerating because you hate our sister, and because Sansa is now your wife,” Jaime tried to protest, searching for a feeble excuse to discard Tyrion’s truth, “Cersei isn’t--”

“Sansa Stark was disrobed in court at your son’s behest,” Tyrion roared, “and our lovely sister did nothing to punish the king for his indecent act.” His eyes were on fire and his breathing turned heavier, his rage stunning Jaime into silence. He had never seen his brother this angry before. “Tell me, Jaime,” his voice was softer now, though the venom in it was unmistakable, “would you have stood by and watched if your precious little boy had done this to an innocent, helpless woman in your presence?”

Jaime slowly shook his head, appalled at the atrocities the poor Stark girl had to endure at the hands of his family.
“I didn’t go quietly either, I did what you’d have done,” Tyrion quietly revealed, “I defied the king, put an end to his nonsense and made sure the poor girl was adequately comforted. While Cersei has done nothing to physically harm her, she’s done everything in her power to butcher the girl’s mind, nearly driving the poor thing to insanity.”

“Revisit my words when you’re in a better frame of mind,” Tyrion told him once he’d calmed down a little, “and then you will be able to separate the truth from the deception.” He went on to add, “For the first time, my dear brother, you’ve inadvertently done something right. So why don’t you take it as a blessing from the seven and honour your vows to this woman you’ve taken as your wife.”

“I’m going to appeal for an annulment soon after Joffrey’s wedding,” Jaime let him know of his decision, ignoring his suggestion.

“You’re going to confide in father?”

“I might have to, but I’m sure father wouldn’t take too kindly to it,” he expressed his fears.

“I’m getting the feeling that father might be happy with your marriage,” Tyrion said thoughtfully, “considering how desperate he is to see you embrace domestic life, he might be in favour of this union.”

“That’s another fear in my mind,” Jaime admitted, wondering if there was any way out of this problem.

“Stop fighting your fate then,” urged his brother, still unmoved from his opinion, “start a new life. Lady Brienne--”

“--detests our union no less than I do,” supplied Jaime, a dull ache spreading across his chest when he remembered that they’d soon part ways, “and she wants a way out of it more than I do.”

“Jaime--”

“I’ve already announced my decision,” Jaime was adamant, “if you really wish to help me, I’d like to find a way out of this marriage.”

Exhaling deeply, Tyrion finally nodded, relinquishing the argument. “Tell father the truth--”

“But--”

“--after you send Lady Brienne on her way,” Tyrion continued, “once she’s gone, I don’t think he can do much about it, except perhaps, berate you for your stupidity.”

“That might work,” Jaime agreed, seeing no other solution.

“Just make sure she’s far beyond his reach,” Tyrion insisted, “somewhere North or perhaps the free cities where he’d have no hold over her.”

“What if I tried to appeal right away... without his knowledge?” Jaime wondered aloud.

“You can’t,” Tyrion shot down his idea, “father has eyes and ears everywhere, and so does Cersei. It might make things worse for Lady Brienne. She has to be safely sent away before you do anything.”

“I’ll think it over.” With that Jaime decided to bring this meeting to a close and got up, keen to take leave of his brother and retire for the night. “I should be going now.”

“Jaime,” Tyrion stopped him before he could step out of the room, “if you’re that keen on getting rid
of your wife, why gift her something that would remind her of you all her life?"

To that, Jaime had no answer, for that was not an aspect he’d thought of. “Why would she bother to remember me?” he questioned his brother instead.

Tyrion began torturing him with one of his analytical stares. “Wouldn’t she?”

“I see no reason for her to,” Jaime argued, though deep down he hoped for her to never forget him, even wishing, at times, that he could see her again under better circumstances.

“Wouldn’t you wish to remember her, brother?”

“That phase of my life will soon be over,” Jaime murmured elusively, “Cersei’s all that will remain in my life—” he paused to take a deep breath “—and in my heart. What Brienne and I share is deep respect, friendship and regard for each other. That is all.”

“That’s not an answer to my question, Jaime,” Tyrion was quick to pounce on him.

“That’s the only answer you’re going to get,” Jaime evaded him, and without waiting to see his expression or his reaction, he began to walk away.

“One last question, Jaime.”

Jaime turned on his heel, wary of what might be in store for him this time.

“Assuming, for a moment, that I accept that you and Brienne have nothing but respect, regard for each other and—” Tyrion pondered for a second “—whatever else you just rattled off, what I cannot fathom is—” he waddled in the direction of his brother until he was close enough to look him in the eye “—how in the name of the seven did you manage to capture her measurements?”

Jaime gaped at him, flummoxed by the bluntness of his question.

“I happen to hold you in high regard and I respect you as well,” Tyrion went on, “but that doesn’t mean I can recite your body measurements to an armourer, can I?”

The wind knocked out of him, Jaime was unsure of what to say next. “That was—”

Tyrion held out a hand to silence him. “You don’t have to answer me, just think about it in solitude.”

A smile spread across his face. “And worry not, brother, I’m damn sure you’ve got her measurements right.”

Red-faced, all Jaime could wish for was a quick death to relieve him of this severe embarrassment. He was about to make good his escape when his brother stopped him again, clearly not yet done with him for the day.

“Do you know Cersei’s?” he asked, squinting at him.

“I don’t quite understand what you mean.”

“Cersei’s measurements,” Tyrion clarified for his benefit, once again stunning him into silence, “do you know them?” Taking advantage of his brother’s momentary shock, Tyrion continued to attack him. “And I also heard you personally picked out Lady Brienne’s clothes, and that you sent in a Septa to attend to her.”

“Yes, because she’s our guest,” said Jaime in a weak attempt to justify his move.
“Do you do that for all our guests?”

“I have to go, Tyrion,” Jaime mumbled, hoping to dash away before he could collapse into a puddle at his brother’s doorstep.

“Good night, Jaime,” said his brother, the victorious smile still pasted on his smug face.

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Days had gone by since his fateful conversation with his brother, but Jaime couldn’t help thinking about it whenever his mind was free from the burden of work, whenever he had nothing but silence, his four walls and ceiling and his solitude for company. The whole family now busy with the wedding preparations, he hadn’t seen much of his sister for long. In fact, he’d barely met her since the night she’d stormed into his bedchamber, running into her only at family dinners and other social occasions. And the lack of her company, to his surprise, didn’t bother him at all. Gone was the restlessness to be by her side, so also the urge to sneak into her room to fuck her whenever an opportunity sprang up. If he had to be brutally honest with himself, he welcomed the distance, the days away from her giving him an opportunity to mull over Tyrion’s revelations.

Was she really as bad as his brother had made her out to be? If he wanted to be ruthlessly truthful to himself, he had to reluctantly accept the fact that Cersei could go to any extent to achieve her means. If that meant tormenting the daughter of her sworn enemy, though not as directly as the monstrous ways of the king, he wouldn’t put it past her to shower the child with all the taunts and sarcasm she could manage, more than enough to reduce a soft and innocent girl like her to a constant state of a tearful mess.

The more he thought of it, the more truth he began to see in his brother’s words.

If there was one thing that brightened up his day, providing him the much needed respite from dark and depressing thoughts such as these, it was the presence of Brienne around him, short lived though it may be. Every time he saw her or spoke to her, he was transported to a different world, all his cares forgotten for the moment, his eyes and ears and his attention for the only woman who recognized him and valued him for who he was.

And it was Brienne he was reminded of while perusing the White Book, Joffrey’s taunt fresh in his mind when he came upon his meagre entry. There’s honour in you, her words rang loud and clear in his mind. Honour that can, perhaps, help fill these pages at some point in the future, he hoped, filled with an urge to see her at once.

Without giving it much thought, he sent for her and within minutes she was at his door. “Come in,” he invited, scrambling to his feet the moment the guard showed her in, “and close the door behind you.”

“What did you want to see me for this late in the night?” She looked surprised.

He pushed the White book towards her. “It is the duty of the Lord Commander to fill these pages,” he told her when she’d read his entry aloud, “there’s still room left on mine.”

“I’m sure one day--”

“That’s not why I asked you here, my lady.” Fetching his sword from its stand, he held it out to her.

Her eyes lit up with excitement as she gave it an appraising look. “Valyrian Steel?”

“Hmm, it’s yours.”
“I can’t--” she began to object, but he was prepared to hear none of it.

“It was reforged from Ned Stark’s blade,” he explained. “you’ll use it to protect his daughters.”

This time she didn’t resist, taking the blade from him, and when he unheld it, his fingers brushed against hers, her touch igniting something unknown inside him. “I’ve got something else for you,” he told her, confident that she wouldn’t refuse the second gift he had for her. Leading her to the corner of the room, he unveiled a shining blue armour. Her eyes went from shock to surprise to gratitude, and when she turned them to him, they shone with something undefinable, something he’d never seen before in them. She looked upon him like no one else ever had.

“I hope I got your measurements right,” he whispered, fighting a losing battle as he tried not to blush when he remembered Tyrion’s comment about it.

For a while Brienne was quiet, admiring the armour in stunned silence.

“I’ll find her,” she said at last, her gaze diverted to the ground as she blinked a million times, “for Lady Catelyn--” when she looked up to meet his eyes, her cheeks were pink and her voice the softest melody he’d ever heard “--and for you.”

They stood there, immersed in each other and would have probably stayed the way they were all night but for the interruption in the form of a knock on the door.

“Enter,” Jaime gave his permission, and in came a girl, Cersei’s handmaiden.

“Her Grace wishes for you to read this,” she said, handing him a roughly rolled-up scroll, “and respond favourably at the earliest.”

He nodded, indicating to the maid that she could leave.

Brienne’s expression changed at once and there came a formal, more guarded look upon her face. “I must leave as well.”

“Oh, stay for some more time, wench,” he implored, not wanting to part company with her yet.

“It’s late,” she said, suddenly uncomfortable in his presence, “it wouldn’t be appropriate for me to stay any longer.”

“If you insist,” he relented, having no intention to compel her. “I’ll have the armour sent to your chambers,” he told her when she was at the door. “They say the best swords have names.” He glanced at the blade in her hands. “Any ideas?”

Brienne thought for a while. “Oathkeeper,” she announced, her voice oddly choked as she locked eyes with his. And then she was gone, leaving him alone with his head full of her. He stared into the empty passage long after she had left, her unshaken faith in him stirring something dormant inside him, awakening a new desire in him to do everything in his power to help her.

Only when he stepped back in did he notice Cersei’s letter in his hand. Wondering what his sister might want from him, he unfolded it and began reading.

*I’m sorry to have overreacted that night. I might have said a few things that I later regretted. I love you and only you--*

Jaime paused, recollecting Tyrion’s words, the rage in him flaring up once again when he pictured her naked in Lancel’s arms.
--and I’m sure you love only me. I believe you and I’m ready to forget the time you spent with that woman. I’ll be happy to welcome you with open arms.

_Come to my chambers at midnight, and I promise you the night of your life._

He clenched his fist, crumpling the note he held. Without a second thought, he tossed the letter into the fire and returned to his desk. He had neither the time nor the inclination to entertain Cersei’s whims and tantrums. He might eventually forgive her and return to her arms, but not tonight, at least, not until he’d had a word with her about her dalliance with their cousin.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Jaime musters the courage to take his "wife" out on a trip to the city, but things go... awry, and there are repercussions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Life has a strange way of unveiling unexpected surprises at times when we least anticipate them,* Jaime mused, having discovered this truth over the last few weeks, *and nothing’s a more fitting evidence to this logic this than my own weird life.*

Prior to his captivity, his world revolved around Cersei, her needs, her happiness, her very existence, but that was only until he’d received a taste of the real world, of what lay beyond his house and his family. Cersei, no doubt, was of primary importance to him even today, but his time away from her had drilled the truth into his head that there were things other than his house, and people other than his sister that mattered to him as well.

Like Brienne…the only woman who dared show him the mirror, one of the very few who displayed the courage to call him Kingslayer to the face, the only person who helped uncover the man behind the oathbreaker - the knight that was hidden behind the derogatory mask he’d worn for more than fifteen years. It was odd that this woman who’d known him for less than a year, and despised him for most of their time together now trusted him unconditionally. She believed in his word more than the one he’d shared a womb with - the love of his life and the central purpose of his existence.

“You could’ve told me in advance if you’d wanted the day off,” scolded the wench, her crisp no-nonsense voice bringing his attention back to what he was supposed to be doing instead of losing himself in the deep chasm of his mind. Before he could find her an apt answer, she lunged at him, tossing him one of her worst scowls as their swords met mid-air. Embarrassed by his diminishing focus, he pulled himself away from his musings and strived to focus on her-rather the duel they were attempting to engage in.

“I’m still on my feet,” he boasted of his achievement, surprised that he’d lasted this long despite his woeful concentration.

“You have the attention span of a child,” she criticized, attacking him again with more force than she usually expended, “worse than a child, at times.”

“I’m just tired,” he made the first excuse that came to mind, raising his hand in surrender.

She gave him a severely examining look, not different from the one Tywin used to scare him with as a child whenever he’d tried to conceal something from him. “No, you’re not,” she called out his lie, laying her weapon aside, “something’s wrong. I can sense it. You’re not your usual self. You haven’t displayed any sign of your usual sarcasm since we arrived. That’s abnormal.”

“It’s --” he hesitated, contemplating whether to confide in her or not “--nothing of importance,” he bluffed, deciding against burdening her with his cares. He’d been lying awake all night, worried
about the consequences of his impulse. Tearing the letter and consigning it to flames was easy, as was ignoring his sister’s orders for him to warm her bed, but to deal with the repercussions of his defiance required nerve and a steely resolve, something he wasn’t sure he possessed. He knew his sister well enough, and he knew she would retaliate, if not today, then tomorrow. And for the first time in his life, he was apprehensive of her reaction, of the treatment she might mete out to the woman who lived in their house as his guest, the one she’d so easily chosen to criticize. He stole a glance at Brienne and noticed that her eyes were full of concern - for him.

*When was the last time Cersei showed me such compassion?*

“It’s quite alright if you don’t want to talk about it, Ser Jaime,” Brienne mumbled, her voice unnaturally feeble, disappointment dulling the brightness of her large luminous eyes. “I understand you might not want to tell me--”

“I’ve shared my weakest moment with you,” he intervened, perching on the ledge behind him, “I’d trust you with my life, wench.”

“Tell me then,” she urged, sitting down beside him, the marriage of softness and determination in her soothing voice encouraging him to spill out every damn thing in his head, “I might not be able to solve your problem, but I can at least help share your burden.”

“It’s Cersei,” he confessed with a huge sigh, half the weight already off his chest.

“Does it have anything to do with the letter you received last night?”

“Yes... and no,” he truthfully answered. “I’ve been wrong in my judgement of her.”

Brienne gave him a reassuring smile. “Why do you think so? She still loves you. She’s obviously glad to have you back safe--”

“--but not in one piece,” he cried out, his voice heavy with anguish as he still reeled from the effects of his sister’s taunts.

“She loves you,” Brienne insisted, trying to allay his insecurity, “not your sword hand, not the warrior that you are--”

“--the warrior I was,” he corrected her, his tone as bland as the future he foresaw. “I thought she’d see past it, but little did I know that without my hand, I’m no one, a man with a once-glorious identity, now utterly useless and unworthy of the title I hold. I’m ashamed to call myself a knight--”

“You’re not--” she stopped him, enclosing his hand with hers “--useless. I wouldn’t be alive, with my honour intact, had it not been for you.”

Hoping his body would ignore the effect her touch had on him, he took to talking to keep his attention off her hand, “She fucked my bloody cousin,” he told her the worst of it, fighting hard to keep his composure and his voice steady, “she couldn’t--”

“It might have been a weak moment,” Brienne reasoned, tightening her hold on his hand, “people tend to get carried away at times--”

“I didn’t,” Jaime growled, his blood boiling in rage, “I’m loyal to her to this day.”

“You never had the opportunity to stray,” she argued, “you were with me all the time--”

“Exactly,” he roared, anger taking control of every nerve, every vein in his body, “I married you, I
could’ve--” chosen to honour my vows to you, he almost inadvertently told her, but one look at her flustered face shut him up, his fury dissolving away, other unfathomable emotions taking its place. He thought it wise to keep quiet, his words meeting an untimely death before they could make it past his mind. Jerking her hand away, she dropped her gaze to the ground, and he, to the rock lying by his side, neither of them saying another word, the awkward turn their conversation had taken erecting a massive wall of tension between them.

“We should leave,” she said at last, addressing the ground, her terrible attempt to break the silence doing no good to ease their mutual discomfort.

Picking up their tourney weapons, they made their way up the stairs and out of there. “In a way I did break my loyalty to her, I married you,” he told her as an afterthought.

“That’s not--” she began, and he knew what she was about to say. Her undying enthusiasm to repeatedly point out the obvious truth that their marriage wasn't real had begun to irk him more than he’d expected these days.

“It could’ve been,” he spoke before she could finish, looking hard into the blue eyes he was afraid he’d drown in, sooner or later. He wasn’t sure if his remark was wishful thinking, or merely a possible alternative their fate might have led them to.

“Let’s go,” she evaded him as usual, little patches of pink beginning to spread across her face as she turned her back to him.

The words slipped past his lips before he could stop himself. “I’m in no hurry to return.”

She wheeled around. “I have to meet with Lady Olenna,” she immediately denied his request for her company, an excuse, obviously, he surmised, “and you’ve got your duties to attend to as well.”

“Spoken as a responsible and dutiful wife would,” he teased, waiting for an opportunity to watch her blush deeper.

And his wish was instantly granted. “We can spare this empty talk for later,” she put him off again, looking more flustered than before.

“How about this evening?” Jaime immediately suggested, smiling, as a plan took shape in his mind. Brienne merely looked at him, the confusion on her face making her look oddly adorable.

“You’ve been here for days and--umm--” he flicked his tongue over his lips, apprehensive about going on, fearing she might outright reject his proposal “--I thought maybe we could--” he hesitated, her frown making him wonder if he should abandon the idea and get the hell out of there.

“What?” she asked, curiosity taking over the confusion in her eyes.

“I could show you the city,” he suggested, finding success, at last, in shedding his inhibitions, “we could go visit the market and then have supper at one of the inns nearby before we return.”

She promptly declined his invitation. “I can’t.”

“Why not?” Disappointed, though he was, with her resistance, he was determined not to let go, not without putting up a fight to melt down her stubborn wall of determination.

“Because--” she paused, and he could sense the uneasiness in her, the way she blinked, fidgeting with her fingers before she went on “--it isn’t appropriate, Ser Jaime.”
You’re my wife, wench, he wanted to argue, what could be more appropriate than a man wanting to spend a quiet evening with his lady?

“We can go in disguise,” he suggested, instead, “no one has to know we’ve been outside the castle walls together.”

She stood there contemplating his idea, taking longer than necessary to announce her decision. “I’ll be there,” she consented when he was nearly about to give up on it.

“Good!” he exclaimed, elated. “Make sure you dress like a man,” he specifically instructed her, “we can’t afford to be discovered.” Or disturbed, he added in his mind, his heart thumping wildly at the prospect of spending a good few hours in her exclusive company.

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Brienne arrived at the gates as she had promised, dressed as they had decided they would. They were both disguised as common sell swords, their clothes arranged by Tyrion’s faithful man, Bronn. Jaime had put on a black glove over his golden hand, the first step to hiding himself being the obvious move to cover the one thing he detested, the one part of him that made him stick out in a crowd like a sore thumb. This is thick enough to conceal my identity, he thought, running his fingers through his now fully-grown beard. His hair was marginally longer than usual, a stark contrast to the closely cropped cut he had adopted at Cersei’s insistence. Again, good enough to hide his Kingslayer identity, for people had mistaken him for one of the smallfolk when he’d entered the city sporting a beard and long hair.

The wench was unrecognisable as well. He had arranged for a black wig to cover her distinctly golden hair, her stature and build ably supporting her endeavour to pretend to be a man. “You look different,” he remarked, taking a proper look at her.

“Go on,” she said wearily, sighing in resignation, “say what you want about me. I look my disguise, don’t I? Mannish, anything but feminine, nothing like a woman should be--”

“I said no such thing,” Jaime protested.

“You’ve said it before!”

“That was when I first met you,” he snapped, letting his eyes linger on her breasts. “When was the last time I criticized your appearance? If I’m not mistaken, was it not months ago?” he demanded, his tone more aggressive than necessary.

“Sorry,” she immediately apologised, “I was reminded of our early days--”

“I’m not that man anymore,” he reiterated, hoping she’d someday understand that his opinion about her was the exact opposite of the first words he had uttered to her. “Shall we proceed?”

With that they commenced their strange trip on mounts they had borrowed for the evening. He had decided to leave his horse behind as well, the pristine white beast as easily identifiable as it’s master, choosing two ordinary steeds from the stables, instead, for them both.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this evening, Ser Jaime,” she wanted to know, as soon as they slipped past the guards that patrolled the gates, successfully concealing their true identities.

“Empty talk?” he playfully reminded her, “like you promised me this morning.”

“I asked you a serious question,” she said with a tired sigh.
“And mine was a serious reply,” he told her, wearing a solemn expression.

She stared at him incredulously. “Are you always like this?”

“Like what?” he feigned ignorance, enjoying the slowly growing frustration on her face.

“This--” she struggled for the right word.

“Yes, my lady?” he continued to tease her, her adorably confused eyes evoking strange emotions within him. “I’m waiting.”

“So irritatingly--” she paused again “-- you.”

“No,” he admitted, surprised that he’d never before unveiled this side of him to anyone, not even to his sister, the woman he’d sworn to spend the rest of his life with. “It’s only with you that I allow myself this privilege, wench,” he said, once again accepting the truth.

“Why, if I may ask?”

He pondered, his eyes rising to the canopy of the pinkish sky above them. “Because I’m your husband, Brienne,” he told her with a straight face, “and who, apart from his wife, can a man grab an opportunity to be playful with?”

“You’re incorrigible,” she muttered under her breath, but he had heard her. One look at her exasperated face and Jaime burst out into uncontrollable peels of laughter. “You’re utterly annoying, and unbearable and--” she trailed away, her face slowly matching the colour of the setting sun.

“I’m sure you mean none of that, my lady,” he said between guffaws of laughter.

She scowled, but said nothing, opting, instead, to tug at her reins and speed up, her mount galloping a few feet ahead of him.

Noting that she was really miffed with his untimely habit to jest with her, he speeded up to match pace with her. “Can I ask you something, wench?” he made a fresh attempt at another conversation, when they were once again riding side by side.

“When have you even sought my permission to ask me something?” she retorted, still obviously angry with him.

“I presume that’s your consent for me to go on,” he took the liberty to jump to that conclusion, going on to voice the question that had been nagging him for days. “Why do you find the idea of marriage so repulsive?”

Her anger melting away, her features softened. “I don’t find it repulsive.”

“I don’t find it repulsive.”

“Why, then, would you not wed and fulfil your destiny to be your father’s heir?” he asked, his curiosity rising as he awaited her answer, “You’re the next Evenstar, the leader of your people.”

A shadow crossed her face. “I’m sworn to Lady Catelyn, you already know that,” she declared, “and that’s what I’m going to dedicate my life to. Service to her family.”

Jaime kept quiet, knowing better than to challenge or question her unconventional decision. His experience with her told him that no one, not even him, could stand against the wench’s commendable argumentative skills. Besides, he had not coaxed her out of the castle gates to engage in petty squabbles with her. Tonight was a chance for him to enjoy her company, their worries to be
forgotten for a few golden hours.

“I thought we came here to talk about Sansa,” she said after a few minutes of internal deliberation, when they began walking their horses through the markets, “that you brought me here to discuss an escape plan for us. Something that we can’t talk about in the castle.”

“Does everything we do have to be connected with Sansa?” He couldn’t bite back his irritation, her refusal to see beyond her vow getting on his nerves.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she quickly changed her stand. He could see her breathe deeply, and then she spoke again, “I’m quite looking forward to spending this evening with you, Ser Jaime,” she told him, granting him the privilege of one of her rare smiles, “so where are you going to take me first?”

Relieved, Jaime returned her smile. “Dresses,” he observed, glancing up at the shops they were passing by, “men’s clothes, if you so choose, weapons - there’s the armoury nearby--”

“Dresses, you’ve made sure I’ve been given enough of,” she said, sending him searching his mind for the unforgettable sight of how lovely her eyes looked in the blue gown she’d worn a few days back, “I have enough pairs of shirts and breeches, so many, that I need no more,” she went on as they rode past the garment stores, “you’ve made sure I have the best armour gold can buy, and weapons--” she looked him in the eye “--why would I need an ordinary weapon when I have a gift as wonderful as Oathkeeper?” she asked, her eyes shining with a rare gleam.

Oathkeeper, he recollected, the name bringing a smile to his lips. By naming her sword so, she’d given him a gift of such honour that not even years of Knighthood had bestowed upon him.

“Where, then, would you--” like to go, he was about to ask her, but before he could finish, they were struck by an untimely distraction in the form of a drizzle, which, within seconds, turned into a proper shower, before progressing into a torrential downpour in just a couple of minutes.

“A well planned evening completely ruined,” Jaime grumbled to himself, frantically looking around them for shelter. With nothing but the shops in the vicinity, which could house them, but not their beasts, they had no choice but to get out of the narrow, crowded street they were trapped in. “An early dinner then,” he announced, deciding that the quickest way for them to get under a roof was the inn.

Once they had secured their horses safely in the stables, dinner turned out to be far from the pleasurable experience Jaime had wanted it to be. Drenched to the skin, sitting down to their meals was becoming more uncomfortable by the minute. Wanting to get it done with, Jaime quickly ordered some food and ale, taking care to hide his highborn accent while he spoke.

“How’re we going to get back?” Brienne asked, concerned, her eyes darting from time to time to the thunder and lightning wreaking havoc outside.

“More ale,” he shouted to the serving lad, downing the last remaining contents of his mug. “It’s better we don’t attempt to travel back to the keep,” he told her with a sigh, dreading that she might lash out at him for what he was about to suggest. “We will have to spend the night here--”

“We can’t,” she objected, looking scandalised.

“We have to--” he stopped, when the boy arrived to refill their mugs. “I see no other way out,” he reasoned with her, taking another big gulp of his drink, “venturing out in this downpour, that too in the darkness is a huge invitation to trouble.”

The distress on her face slowly dissipated as she sat there, considering the matter. “Very well,” she
conceded, “but how do you propose we spend the night in these wet clothes?” she asked, looking down at herself in disgust.

“I’ll try to arrange for something.”

They ate in silence, and Jaime called for more ale, the warmth of the alcohol making him feel better, distracting him from the awful wetness of his uncomfortable clothes, flooding his mind with lazy, comforting thoughts - thoughts of the wench who sat in front of him, oblivious of the turmoil within him.

It’s nothing but the ale, he told himself, allowing his eyes to linger on her, I should be normal when the effect wears off...

Thankfully they soon finished eating, and he didn’t have to dwell too much on his alarming thoughts. “We need two rooms for the night,” he demanded, setting down a bag of gold on the counter, when they approached the innkeep to make arrangements for their stay.

“There’s only one available, lads,” the old man informed them.

“Two is what we need, and you might as well oblige us,” Jaime tried an intimidating tone, sensing this to be a ploy to extort more gold out of two weary travellers.

“One is all I have,” the man growled, undeterred by Jaime’s threat, “and that’ll be gone too, unless you decide now.” He looked over their shoulders to the door, indicating an incoming crowd of travellers.

“We’ll take it,” Brienne hurriedly agreed, masking her actual voice, her tone deep enough to be mistaken for a man’s.

“Young friend seems to be a lot less hotheaded, maybe you ought to learn a thing or two from him,” the innkeep advised Jaime. Furious with his audacity, Jaime was about to say something nasty to put him in his place, but Brienne touched his arm, and something about her calmed him down.

“Thank you,” she told the man, pushing the money in his direction as she accepted the keys he held out. “Could we also have some towels and bathrobes please?” she requested in her politest tone.

“Sure,” said the man, sparing her a smile.

“Let’s go,” she whispered to Jaime, leading him up the stairs. “What is the matter with you?” she hissed, when they were alone at last. “That was so unlike you. One more word, and you would’ve thrown away your identity.”

“You’re right,” he agreed, forcing himself to calm down, “I got carried away for a while.” His mood changed at once, and he broke into an impressed grin as they made their way to their room. “You did quite well.”

“I’m used to posing as a man,” she wryly remarked, a faraway look in her eyes, “you seem to have forgotten that I’ve been in the midst of men in Renly’s guard. I know how to walk and talk like one.”

You’re nothing like a man, he sighed, drawing in a deep breath, the memory of her naked body pressed against him in the bathtub returning to haunt him. To his utter embarrassment and frustration, something stirred within his breeches, an untimely and ill-placed distraction as he couldn’t get the vision off his head. His pulse quickened as he allowed his mind to delve deeper into the minutest details of her feminine curves. Unable to shake himself off the pleasantly distressing images in his inner eye, he could distinctly see her creamy skin, her long legs, her soft hands as she held him and...
took care of him in his most vulnerable state, her blue eyes - the last thing he’d seen before collapsing in her arms, all of it now beginning to torment him.

Too much ale and the memory of seeing her naked, he convinced himself, hoping she wouldn’t notice the rapidly increasing bulge in his pants. All will be well when she leaves, he consoled himself, when she is far away and I’m back in Cersei’s arms.

Cersei...

Oddly, the prospect of spending the rest of his life with his sister didn’t paint a picture that rosy anymore, particularly when visions of his cousin pleasuring her kept flashing across his head, constantly leaving him in a state of confusion, leading him to question his romantic feelings for his sister, feelings that appeared to be slowly, but surely, diminishing. Cersei and Lancel, his mind wandered, rage replacing the arousal Brienne had caused. But the anger and frustration too ebbed away seconds later, making only the briefest of appearances within him, his fury giving way to a sinking feeling he’d never experienced before, an inexplicable weight that pulled him down, a realization that this life he’d been leading for the past few months would soon come to an end.

I’m never going to see Brienne again once she leaves, he forced himself to accept the future that awaited him, and I’m going to have to get used to her absence.

“Are you planning to stand there gaping at the floor all night?” her irate voice hit his ears, dragging him back to where he was.

Shaking himself back to normalcy, he followed her into the room and shut the door. “We need to change out of these wet clothes,” she said, tossing a bundle of clothes to him. “Get on with it quickly unless you plan to fall sick in the morning.”

“You appear to be quite concerned about my health,” he commented, flashing her a mischievous grin. “Have I grown on you, wench?”

She blinked a couple of times on hearing this, but soon after, her expression was even and her tone as crisp as usual. “There’s a towel and bathrobe in there,” she informed him, “tell me if you need any help—” She stared at him, frozen to the spot when he began stripping with his gaze fixed on her.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, struggling, as usual with the many layers he’d worn.

“Look away,” she brusquely ordered him, grabbing the second pile of clothes that lay on the bed, her hand slipping to her chest in an attempt to undress herself.

“We could help each other,” he suggested, looking at her hopefully.

“Only if you want a punch in the gut,” she barked, scowling as she turned her back to him.

Her irritation only amused him. Whistling a tune, he began peeling his clothes off, one layer after the other, his fight against every piece of garment mostly meeting success, but for the in-shirt that was stuck to his body, the wetness preventing him from getting it off. “Fuck!” he swore loudly after what was, probably, his fourth attempt to slide the bloody piece of clothing off him.

“Can I help?” she called out from the other side of the bed. He stopped what he was doing, noticing that she’d been watching his battle with his shirt, her faint smile telling him that she had been enjoying the spectacle from a distance.

“Since you so nicely asked,” he replied, smirking, “I wouldn’t mind it,” he invited her. When she came over to his side, he noticed that she was left in nothing but her trousers and her shirt, the thin
fabric clinging to her chest. Her nipples were poking into the wet cloth, threatening to burst out of it, the shape of their outline distinctly visible. He drew in a sharp breath, the sight throwing him into another state of misery that was uncalled for.

*Gods, not again,* he groaned to himself, sensing another bout of arousal that was beginning to set in.

She took his shirt off, leaving him bare-chested, her hands sliding down to his breeches, and before he could stop her or do anything about it, her fingers brushed against his groin.

“I’m sorry,” she yelped, drawing away as if she’d been bitten by a wasp, “I didn’t mean to--”

“Calm down, wench,” he told her, hoping his reassurance would calm *him* first, “there’s nothing down there you haven’t seen before.”

She blushed a deep red. “That was different, this is--”

“What?” he asked, before he could contain himself.

“Nothing, I think you should be able to manage the rest.” She swiftly darted off to her side, leaving him to cope with his loudly beating heart by himself. Once he had got out of his breeches, he began wiping himself dry.

“Oww!” he heard her cry out in pain, distracting him from whatever he was doing.

Wrapping the towel around his waist, he immediately rushed to her aid. “What’s the matter, wench?” he inquired, searching her body for the source of the pain.

“My neck,” she groaned, pointing to the still unhealed wounds the bear had given her, “I can’t get this bloody thing off me,” she grumbled, wincing in pain as she tried to shrug her shirt off her shoulders.

“Let me,” he offered, coming closer, but she retreated a step when she comprehended his presence, pulling the shirt to cover her chest. “There’s nothing in there I haven’t seen before,” he whispered when she hesitated, the memory painfully fresh in his mind.

“That was--”

“--I know,” he said hoarsely, before she could finish protesting, “but you have no option since I’m the only one around. So let me assist you.”

She didn't refuse, but she didn't grant him her permission, either, so he did nothing, except stare at her, letting himself delve deeper into her eyes, only to be distracted by a couple of beads of water that hugged her long lashes. He let his eyes wander over her face, taking in her damp, flushed skin before settling on her full lips. She parted them slowly, and his cock twitched in response, his mind unresponsive while he tried to deal with wild imaginations of what it would be like to sink his teeth into those lips, to suck them dry of the fat droplets of ale that stuck to them, waiting to be licked away, to kiss them like they’d never been kissed before, leaving them swollen and aching for more.

He wanted to turn away, to stop feasting his eyes on her, but his body refused to cooperate with logic, his eyes and his other senses having ominous plans of their own.

His heart skipped a beat when his gaze further descended, his breathing becoming laboured and heavy as he caught sight of her heaving chest. *Look away,* screamed a part of him, but he went on staring unabashedly. He grew hard when he noted the outline of her firm breasts, though covered by her shirt, leaving little to his imagination. He pictured those taut pink nipples in his mind’s eye,
admiring the way they stood erect, asking to be touched.

“I thought you were going to help me,” her soft voice broke the spell.

“Y--yes,” he stuttered, finding his tongue again.

She turned, her back facing him, waiting for him to touch her, to get her bloody clothes off. Compelling himself to focus, he first slid her right sleeve off her shoulder, his hand working at an excruciatingly slow pace, his mind running even slower, the disconnect between the two parts of him painfully evident. He let his fingers ghost across her bare, wet back as he reached for her left shoulder. She shivered at his touch, the ache between his legs increasing with her reaction. Pulling down her left sleeve, he let the shirt fall to the floor.

“That will be all--” she began, but stopped when his hand crept across her shoulder and to the scar on her neck. He felt her tremble when he gently traced the wound with his fingers.

“Does it still hurt?” he asked, his voice unsteady and hoarse.

“At--at times,” she replied, breathless.

“And the other injuries?” he whispered, stepping closer, exhaling into her naked flesh.

“Not much.” Gulping down most of her words, she was barely audible now.

Jaime let his hand slip a little further, his fingers meeting the beginning of the swell of her breast. Warmth flooded his whole body as he took another blind step towards her. She shuddered when the coarse hairs of his chest brushed against her smooth back, and he could feel her chest heaving under his palm, his pulse racing as he counted every beat of her furiously thumping heart. His hand ached to move further down. A few more inches, he thought, his fingers twitching madly as his mind erupted into wild visions of what those hard tits would feel like under his thumb.

“Ser Jaime!”

She stepped away before he could do anything he’d regret later, grabbing the towel on the bed and wrapping it around herself.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, cursing himself the moment he was back to his senses, ashamed with his impertinence and his lack of restraint. “I--I didn’t mean to--” didn’t mean to--do what, exactly? He had not the appropriate words for her - neither a proper apology nor a reasonable explanation for his actions.

“It’s--” she hesitated, for she was as flustered at him, his blunder erecting a wall of awkward discomfort between them “--it’s alright,” she finally said, leaving him relieved that she’d forgiven him. “I understand it was the effect of the ale.” She blushed hard. “Alcohol makes you do strange things at times. I trust you--that you bear no ill-intentions towards me.”

The ale obviously, he decided, making a mental note never to drink this much again, that’s what’s corrupting my mind.

“Right,” he murmured, “it was the ale, of course. It won’t happen again.”

As he slipped into his robe, he resolved to put as much distance between him and the wench when they slept tonight.

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“You should be ashamed for betraying me,” cried his sister, her eyes burning through him, melting his insides.

“I’ve been loyal to you,” he argued, hoping she’d see sense and revoke her decision.

“You slept with this bitch,” she spat, turning her fiery eyes to Brienne who stood a few feet away, her head held high, no shame nor fear in her eyes, “you bloody fucked this whore, Jaime.”

“I didn’t,” he roared, instantly denying her allegation, “and she’s not a whore, she’s my wife.”

Cersei smiled, a smile so ominous and evil he’d never yet seen on her lips. “Not for long,” she snarled, “for dead she will soon be, and you, free of her, free to be mine once again, and only mine. No woman who looks at you twice deserves to live--”

“No,” he tried to protest, to protect the wench, to keep her safe from his sister, but the gold cloaks holding his restraints pulled him back, confining him to where he stood, while he struggled to rush to the rescue of the woman he’d sworn to protect until the end of his days. “She’s innocent,” he tried again, but Cersei paid no heed to him.

“Ser Ilyn,” she commanded the executioner, “bring me her head.”

“Noooo,” he yelled, but he could do nothing, nothing but stare helplessly as her head rolled to the floor, filling him with despair, a sense of emptiness, a feeling of hopelessness that commanded him to join the woman he’d vowed to protect in death, for he had failed her, failed to uphold his promise to her. “I’m sorry, Brienne,” he wept softly, “I--”

“Ser Jaime!”

“I’m sorry,” he lamented, unable to meet her eyes, “I should have protected you, you’re my wife, you--”

“Ser Jaime!” Brienne shouted again, this time right into his ear.

His eyes finally wide open and his senses fully awakened, only now did Jaime realize what had just happened. The sun had risen, and the wench was sitting next to him, alive and well. “I’m here,” she soothingly consoled him, caressing his cheek, “right here, right beside you.”

Closing his eyes, he heaved a sigh of relief.

“Nightmare?” she asked, wiping the sweat off his brow.

Without thinking or bothering to answer her, he did the first thing his instinct urged him to and grabbed her into an embrace. He held her close to his chest, inhaling her familiar scent and relishing the fact that she was alive. “Gods, I’m glad you’re safe,” he gasped, shuddering at what he would’ve gone through, had this not been a dream.

“I--” she struggled for words “--nothing’s wrong with me,” she assured him, draping her arms around him after a few seconds of reluctance. “Whatever you saw was just a nightmare,” she breathed into his neck, “I’m alive, I’m with you.”

Neither of them said anything after that. He didn’t pull away, nor did she. She tenderly stroked his hair and he tightened his grip around her waist, pressing her against his chest, his hand rubbing her back. Left to him, he’d have sat there all day. Fear for her life, within no time, was beginning to turn into something else, the sensations she’d evoked in him last night threatening to return, to torment him.
Thank the gods, nothing untoward happened last night, he realized, noting that their robes were still intact.

Brienne let go of him before his thoughts could go astray. “We must prepare to leave,” she said, leaping off the bed with more haste than was required.

They got dressed in silence, both of them keeping to themselves, and within minutes they had left the inn, ready to embark on their journey back home. “You go first,” he told her, the horrible dream still fresh in his mind, “trouble might crop up if people see us together.”

“You worry too much,” she protested, “what you saw was just a dream, a bad one.”

You don’t know my sister, he thought, an ominous feeling of dread engulfing him. “Do as I say,” he told her in a tone that indicated he wasn’t in a mood to entertain any arguments.

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They skipped training that morning. Jaime began his day earlier than usual, overloaded with preparations for the wedding to come, the work, thankfully, diverting him from his thoughts and helping him cope with the aftermath of the eventful night they had been through.

A knock on the door was the first thing to disrupt his concentration that morning.

“Enter,” he said without looking up from the map he was perusing, hoping it might be Brienne, though he could think of no valid reason she would be here for.

To his disappointment, It was Cersei’s handmaiden once again. “Her grace would like to see you in her chambers.”

“Tell her I’ll be with her in a while,” Jaime dismissed the girl, irked that his visitor wasn’t the wench.

“She wants to see you now,” the maid insisted, refusing to budge. “She asked me to fetch you. Told me to tell you that she wouldn’t take anything else for an answer, m’lord,” she timidly conveyed the message to him.

“Very well,” he conceded, stepping out of the room with her, sighing deeply as he wondered what the matter could be this time. Since the message she’d sent him two nights ago, he had not met her, not even during mealtimes, for he spent most meals eating alone or with Tyrion. Anticipating his dismissal of her letter to be the reason for this unscheduled meeting, he prepared himself for a confrontation while on the way to her chambers.

The moment he stepped in, he found Cersei pacing the room, the look on her face far from pleasant. “Why don’t you sit down, Ser Jaime?” She pointed to a vacant chair, gesturing to the maid to leave them alone.

Jaime refused to move, standing by the door as he stared at her. “Have you summoned me for just a chat?”

“That and more,” she told him, pouring out two glasses of wine. “Here,” she offered him one, but he declined.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “Won’t you have a drink with me? Have other things become more important to you than your sister.”

His patience was quickly thinning. “If there’s nothing of importance, I’m leaving—”
“Have you heard the latest rumours doing the rounds of the city?”

“I have no time for such things,” he began, his growing irritation pushing him to abandon this unproductive conversation.

“Then I suggest you make time to hear them,” she advised him with a smirk, “because they happen to be about you, Jaime.”

His blood turned into ice, leaving him wondering if this might have something to do with last night’s adventure. “What do you mean?” he slowly asked, dreading her answer.

“If my reliable sources are to be believed, you happen to have a new woman at your disposal,” she seethed, her eyes spitting fire at him, just like in his dream, “the one you spent the night with--” she paused for a second, spewing more venom at him with her glance than her words “--at an inn, in the same room, on the same bed--”

Jaime felt like he’d been slapped in the face. “That’s--that’s not what happened. It’s not what you think it is.”

“What is it, then?” she demanded, the cold fury in her eyes making him instantly fear for the wench’s safety. “Was she the reason you refused me that night? I waited and waited, but you never turned up,” she complained, every inch of her usually pretty face full of jealousy and loathing. “Little did I know then that you betrayed me, your loyalty towards me sacrificed on the bed of this bitch--”

Dread gave way to anger when Jaime was reminded of Lancel. “What happened to your loyalty, Cersei?” he confronted her. “You saw no shame in seeking comfort in the our dear cousin’s bed when I was away. You cheat in my absence as if it is your right to do so. Why, then, do you expect me to comply with your demands whenever you want to fuck me?”

Her expression changed, hatred giving way to remorse that he could clearly make out was nothing but fake, a show to convince him. “Lancel was a mistake--”

“You repeatedly fucked him,” he shouted, “once can be a slip of resolve, a mistake--”

“And what about this bitch?” She was back to her poisonous tone, the false display of regret disappearing as fast as she’d conjured it. “They call her the Kingslayer’s whore, the woman he brought home from the Riverlands, his to keep and to fuck--”

“I will not hear such things about her,” he cut her, blood pounding through his veins.

“It is not me who says this, brother,” she informed him, revelling in his fury, “but the entire city. Brienne of Tarth is a noblewoman, and such stories, if left to grow, could tarnish her reputation for good,” she said smoothly.

“She’s no whore,” he defended her, “she’s--”

“I know what she is,” snapped Cersei, “and I also know that you haven’t fucked her--” she gave a second’s pause before adding, “yet.”

“I have no such intentions towards her,” he firmly told her.

“Prove it then,” ordered his sister, “get rid of her.”

“I’ve had enough of this conversation, Cersei.”
Without waiting for a response nor turning to see her reaction, Jaime stormed away from there, rushing back to the safe haven of the White Tower, his mind clouded with the ominous memories of his nightmare. Was it an advice Cersei had given him? Or was it an indirect threat?

“Ser Jaime,” called a voice from behind him, making him stop in his tracks when he was just about to enter his office. It was one of his father’s personal guards. “Lord Tywin wishes to see you,” he told him, “now.”

*First Cersei, and now father,* Jaime groaned, *can the day get any worse?* Nevertheless, Jaime decided to honour the summons. Wondering what his father could possibly want with him, he followed the man to the Tower of the Hand.

“Leave us,” Tywin commanded the man as soon as they entered.

Jaime decided to come to the point. “What did you want to see me for?”

“What is this nonsense I’m hearing these days?” his father bellowed, and Jaime instantly understood what he was here for.

“None of it is true,” he began defensively, “they’re just--”

“--rumours?” the older man thundered. “All rumours tend to have a basis in fact, son, remember that. Facts, I can find out for myself, but you on the other hand-- ” he gave Jaime a look of disapproval “--can only hide behind excuses. So what might your excuse be?”

“I need no excuse,” Jaime defiantly put up a fight, “I did nothing wrong.”

“Then why is the Tarth woman here?” Tywin demanded.

“For a reason,” he vaguely answered.

“What reason might that be?” his father inquired, his voice low, but the tone commanding enough to make Jaime feel like he was ten again.

“As a guest,” he lied, “my guest.”

“Why?” His father’s piercing green eyes had the power to reduce him to ashes. “Have you been fucking her?”

“No,” Jaime shouted, the familiar anger slowly rising in his chest, “she’s a high-born lady--”

“--so is your sister,” Tywin intervened, “but that’s never stopped you from--” he stopped, looking disgusted. “Tell me the truth, Jaime.”

“This is the truth,” Jaime explained, “I respect her.”

“Is that all?” Tywin asked him again. “Why do they call her the Kingslayer’s whore then?”

“She’s no whore,” Jaime continued to insist, tired of repeatedly hearing the same thing, “she’s--”

“Does a lady spend the night in the bed of a man she isn’t married to?” his father asked, stunning him into silence. “If you didn’t bed her, what were you doing in that inn with her last night?”

“It’s not what it appears to be,” he managed to speak at last.

“This fills me with nothing but revulsion,” Tywin went on, his forehead creasing into a frown, “first
it was Cersei, and now this woman, this bloody whore--"

“She’s no whore,” he repeated, gritting his teeth, “she’s--”

“Any woman you fuck is a whore,” Tywin shouted, paying no heed to his protests, “unless she’s your wife.”

“She’s a lady, she’s no--”

“You spent months in her company,” his father continued relentlessly, “who knows how often you warmed her cunt? I’m ashamed of you, Jaime, and I’m sure Lord Selwyn would feel the same the day these foul truths reach his ears. His daughter, the Kingslayer’s whore--”

“She’s no whore,” Jaime lashed out, his fingers trembling in rage and his voice louder than his father’s, “she’s my wife.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Discussions. Deliberations. And decisions.

Chapter Notes

Fluff alert!!! The second half of this chapter is full of it.

The gravity of the situation his confession had unfolded struck Jaime a second after he’d admitted the truth, along with the blunt reality that this bond of matrimony he’d forged with the wench was now etched in stone. To erase all traces of his relationship would now mean diving into oceans of fire and emerging victorious, his father being one of the worst hells he’d have to face to meet success.

She’s my wife…

The words had tumbled out of his mouth before he could keep his emotions under check, the effect of the frustration that had been simmering inside him at the repeated insults his family so easily hurled at the wench. It had been a fit of impulse, a manifestation of the rage that had been threatening to explode, but only now, after he’d spent the next few seconds thinking about what he’d just done, did he realize the possessiveness with which he had uttered those words. Though Brienne wasn’t really his wife, something deep within his heart had urged him to shout out to the world that she was his, and he was hers. That not a soul around them could dare lay a hand on her or point a finger at her virtue. By no means did he regret his adverse reaction, but as time slipped by and his anger melted away, only to be instantly replaced by fear for her well-being and her future, he was beginning to get increasingly apprehensive of the implications of his confession. What this meant for him and Brienne, he couldn’t exactly fathom, nor did he dare imagine the consequences of this bond he’d been forced to enter into.

What baffled him the most was his father’s reaction, for the formidable Tywin Lannister merely stared at him, unblinking and unmoved, resorting to a deathly silence that was unbecoming of him. It was quite rare for him to be so utterly dumbfounded by someone or something, this being one such odd occasion where he had no words for what was nothing short of a verbal slap on his face.

I had to do this, Jaime repeatedly consoled himself, for the treatment his kin had decided to mete out to Brienne had left him with no option but to come out with the truth to clear her name. While his action could hardly bode well for either of them, he just couldn’t stand still and listen to his father, his sister and a horde of countless other people call her a whore.

“Have you bedded her?” were the first words his father spat out post an awfully deathly silence, and this time, it was Jaime’s turn to gape at him open-mouthed, hopelessly skimming his brain for an answer.

“I--” he spluttered, fire spreading down his groin as he attempted to find a suitable explanation for his wife still being a virgin weeks after being wed to him. That a remote corner of his brain tried to
spring up mental images of what bedding her might turn out to be only made matters worse for the storm brewing within him.

Tywin left his chair and approached him. “Is she still a maiden?” he rephrased his question, this time his words less crude despite the mounting displeasure in his tone.

“I haven’t touched her yet,” Jaime vehemently claimed, hoping this wasn’t going where he thought it was.

“Why not?” his father demanded. “Judging by the look on your face, I daresay you have anything against it.”

“Because--” he ceased talking to clear his mind, discarding the advice the dangerous voices in his head were beginning to force on him “--she’s not really my wife,” he mumbled, the heat from his thighs spreading all over his body. “Not in that sense.”

“In what sense, then, is she your wife?” Tywin appeared to be putting in a tremendous amount of effort to keep his voice even and his patience intact. “Pray, enlighten me, son.”

“I married her for a reason.” Jaime decided to be cryptic, to wait and watch.

“Would you care to elaborate on that?” asked Tywin, never one to give up on an interrogation.

“And, why in the fucking seven hells, of all the women who’d gladly throw themselves at your feet, did you have to pick this one?”

_I didn’t pick her_, he wanted to argue, _we don’t get to choose who we--_

“I would’ve mistaken her for a man had someone not mentioned she’s a woman,” Tywin went on with his relentless criticism.

“Do not insult her,” Jaime jumped to her defence at once, meeting his father’s steely eyes with irritation, “she’s far better than those pretty maidens you once wished me to court, a breath of fresh air--”

“So prompt are you in defending her, hmm?” observed his father at once, him tone pointed and blunt. He placed a patronising hand on his shoulder. “Tell me, son, have you fallen in love with this beast of a woman?”

“No!” Jaime hotly denied. “I told you, I had no choice but to wed her,” he hastily explained, wanting to clear his father’s misunderstanding. “I’m not in love with her, far from it, really. We were thrown together by fate, and we had to stick to each other due to unavoidable circumstances.” Recalling their earlier days, he went on, speaking more from Brienne’s perspective than his, knowing how much she’d been repulsed by their union, “We’ve almost ripped off each other’s heads more than once. So there’s nothing more we’d like, than to put as much distance between us as possible.”

His father, however, appeared to be unconvinced. “Tell me more,” he insisted, “I’d very much like to learn how I’ve come upon the privilege of acquiring a daughter-in-law my son takes pleasure in detesting.”

“I don’t detest her,” he quickly made himself clear, “I just--”

“You just…?” prompted his father after a few seconds of waiting for him to speak. When Jaime was still preoccupied with scanning his mind for something appropriate to say next, his father was at his wit’s end. “Go on, boy,” he thundered irritably, “I’m sure you have no difficulty putting a couple of words together. Or did the Boltons chop off your tongue as well?”
Forced out of his strained silence, Jaime went on to relate the whole tale of their strange journey to his father, about how they had been captured and compelled into getting married to save their skins, about how he’d given her his word that he’d have the marriage terminated as soon as he’d safely made it home. “Now that you know the truth,” he concluded, hoping his father would understand his predicament, “I need your help getting it annulled--”

“Nonsense,” Tywin bellowed, cutting him off before he could speak another word, “you’re doing no such thing. I’m neither going to help you with your stupid idea, nor am I going to allow you to do anything like that.”

“You can’t stop me,” Jaime protested, filled with dread. “This marriage was a necessary evil, an unavoidable compromise--”

“I don’t care what it was, I’m only interested in what it will be - a union of Houses Lannister and Tarth, the beginning of a new era for my name,” Tywin authoritatively imposed. “You will take her to Casterly Rock, bed her and put a child in her--”

“I will do no such thing!” Jaime cried out, picturing Brienne’s reaction if she learned of his father’s plans for their marital life. “Brienne married me out of compulsion, she desires to get out of this, to head out to where her future lies. She has her own destiny to write, and I’m not a part of it,” he said, the reality filling him with a strange sense of emptiness.

Tywin seemed to consider his words for a minute, the momentary cessation of his father’s sarcasm striking a spark of hope in him. “You do remember you wear the white cloak, don’t you?” he said, subtly pointing out that he’d broken yet another vow to yet another king.

Jaime hung his head, despair slowly filling every pore of him. “I do.”

“And you also know your act is punishable by death.” Tywin continued. “Appealing to the High Septon for an annulment would mean admitting that you entered into a matrimonial bond forsaking your vow. Do you realize the implications of this?”

“Execution, perhaps,” Jaime quietly accepted, “and another credit to me as an Oathbreaker,” he added, unable to bite back his bitterness.

“Precisely,” his father agreed, “that’s your fate unless you decide to stop being an idiot and listen to me.”

“I can’t let her be bound to me all my life,” Jaime protested, instantly deciding what mattered more to him, “if it costs me my life and my reputation, so be it.”

“Her future lies with you,” Tywin continued to be adamant.

“I cannot decide on her behalf,” he firmly maintained his stand, “and I cannot inflict this terrible fate upon her, not when her life nor her heart has any room for me.” He lowered his gaze, recollecting all that the wench had once said to him. “I’m the last man a principled woman like Brienne would ever marry.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re in love with her?” Tywin asked him again, narrowing his eyes.

“I respect her,” he said earnestly, “she’s the friend I never had. But there has never been anything more than that between us. She has her own path to carve.”

“And what might that path be?” his father was quick to question.
Jaime’s mouth ran dry, for there was no way he could disclose the true intentions behind her presence in King’s Landing.

“Returning to the Starks, if I might make a guess?” his father prompted, making him more uncomfortable. “What good would that be for her? Most of them are dead, Arya’s missing and Sansa’s now a Lannister.”

“She doesn’t want this marriage—”

“I don’t care what she wants,” Tywin roared.

“But I do,” Jaime shouted, “I care about what she wants!”

“You care about her more than what she wants,” his father pointed out, “and because you do, you’ll do as I say.”

Jaime’s stomach did a little lurch as he sensed something ominous coming. “What do you mean?” he mustered the courage to ask his father, dreading the answer.

Tywin had a sly smile on his lips, his usual manipulative nature threatening to show its ugly face. “Is Cersei aware of your little adventure?”

Jaime exhaled deeply, terrible thoughts filling his head. “She’s beginning to suspect there’s something going on between us.”

Tywin’s smile widened, a malicious glint appearing in his eyes. “There’s far more than just something going on between you two. You’re fucking married!” he exclaimed. “Do you realize how livid your sister’s going to be when she comes to hear of this development?”

“What are you driving at?”

“Accept this woman as your wife and fulfil your destiny as my heir,” his father issued an ultimatum, “and I’ll assure you Lady Brienne will remain safe from Cersei’s clutches.”

So blackmail it is.

Knowing his father, he should’ve anticipated a deal like this. “And what if I don’t?” Jaime wanted to know the other end of this agreement, because as far as the Lannister way of getting what one wanted went, there had to be one.

“Your beloved Lady Brienne runs the risk of incurring Cersei’s wrath,” said his father in a matter-of-fact tone, “and paying for taking what is not hers with her life.”

Jaime’s palms turned sweaty despite the chilling truth his father confronted him with, the possibility of his nightmare coming to life beginning to haunt him once again. “And you’re going to keep her safe if I agree to enter into a domestic life with her?”

“That’s what I just told you,” Tywin repeated, mildly irritated. “It’s not that difficult to understand, is it?”

Jaime shook his head, still adamantine. “I’m not going to ruin her life—”

“By doing this, you’ll only be saving both your lives and your honour,” his father cut in sharply. “I can’t have my firstborn die an oathbreaker. We’re going to keep your little mistake between us until I speak to the king to relieve you from the Kingsguard with immediate effect. And once that is done,
I’m going to arrange for a ceremony at the Sept of Baelor tonight to make your union public--”

“I need time to think about it,” Jaime tried to stall.

“For the benefit of family and friends and the rest of the city,” Tywin continued, unaffected by Jaime’s objections, “you will wed her once again and make her yours tonight. You will leave for Casterly Rock once the Royal wedding is over. This way, you haven’t broken any vows in the eyes of the world. Your secret remains safe, and so does your wife.”

“But--”

“I’ll give you time to think,” his father generously offered, “until this afternoon. Make up your mind by then.”

Knowing he was dismissed and it was pointless in pursuing the matter further, Jaime made to leave, when his father stopped him.

“Can she bear children?”

“I--I don’t know,” Jaime mumbled, wondering if Brienne had, even in her wildest dreams, given the idea of motherhood any consideration.

“Well, we’ll find out soon,” his father said coolly. “I expected you to have a better taste in women, Jaime,” he went on to mock him, “but this one should do, I suppose, provided she is good enough to bear your sons.”

Jaime could do nothing but stare at his father in despair, thanking the gods that the wench wasn’t here to witness this disturbing exchange.

“Go now,” his father waved him away, “and be the man you were meant to be.”

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Jaime related the whole conversation to his brother at lunch, and Tyrion heard in silence, his eyes shining, though he was unsurprised when his father’s doings were revealed to him. “I can’t imagine you could be this naive, Jaime,” he scolded, taking a huge gulp from his goblet when Jaime had finished. “Did I not tell you to shut the hell up about this?”

“If I were you,” Tyrion began cautiously, pausing after every word, “I’d take father’s word and honour this marriage.”

Jaime put down his glass, miffed at his brother’s unsupportive stand. “You know I can’t--”

“I know you care about her,” Tyrion stopped him, “enough to keep her safe from Cersei.”

Jaime sighed deeply, leaning back in his chair as the horrible sense of doom and hopelessness returned to crush his chest and cripple his limbs. “Father blackmailed me with that same reason,” he confessed to his brother. “He said he’d keep her safe from Cersei if I would--”

“--bed her and put a child in her?” Tyrion prompted, smirking slightly as he eyed Jaime curiously. Jaime blanched. “How do you--”
“That’s what he told me when he ordered me to marry Sansa,” Tyrion wryly recollected, “and the girl has hated me ever since.” He looked lost, almost regretful when he mentioned his wife. “Father revels in making us dance to his tunes, for we’re nothing but his puppets to power and fame.” he went on, his tone laced with bitterness. “Of course, you’re his golden son--”

“--who is being compelled to assume his rightful position as his golden son ,” Jaime interrupted, irked by the tone his brother employed. “He hasn’t spared me either.”

“At least, you get to have the marriage of your choice,” Tyrion argued.

“It was not out of choice,” Jaime shot back, “I don’t want Casterly Rock, I don’t want a wife, or children--”

“But you do want to ensure Lady Brienne’s safety,” said his brother, accurately reading his mind, as always. “You value her life more than anything else, more than even your love for Cersei.”

“Do you think Cersei will harm her?”

“I know our sister will stoop to any extent to hurt her,” Tyrion confidently asserted. “She will expend every effort required to make sure Lady Brienne pays adequately for her audacity to have staked the ultimate claim upon what our sister believes is hers from birth.”

Jaime decided to seek his brother’s opinion. “What is the way out? Apart from--”

“Do as father says,” Tyrion maintained his stand, “forget the annulment and take your wife to Casterly Rock. Lie low for a while and then we can think about what to do next.”

“Brienne would never agree to this,” Jaime whined, picturing the wench’s reaction to this unfavourable news. “She’s been seeking an escape route out of here from the minute we stepped into these gates. She hates us.”

“She hates Cersei, perhaps, and our sister deserves all the loathing she can get, but she far from hates you,” Tyrion disagreed. “I think you know that too.”

“What she thinks about me is not going to make her alter her decision,” Jaime murmured, knowing full well how the wench’s stubbornness would unfold.

“ She wouldn’t agree to this, you say,” Tyrion was quick to pick up his emotion, “but what do you say, Jaime? The way you speak, I doubt you find this as unsavoury as you project it to be.”

“I’d live on with this for her,” said Jaime, jumping to the first reason that crossed his mind, “I’d do anything to keep her safe.”

“Anything?” pressed his brother, squinting at him. “Including giving up on your lifelong dream of a life with Cersei?”

“This is no permanent arrangement,” Jaime pointed out, “only as long as--”

“--father lives?” scoffed Tyrion. “Father’s going to live until our grandchildren bear their heirs.” Jaime could sense an acrid note in his brother’s tone “Doesn’t this loudly and clearly tell you that this is an almost permanent arrangement?”

Jaime scowled at him, confused and exasperated. “I don’t understand. I thought you were encouraging me to uphold this marriage. Are you now trying to dissuade me?”
“I’m merely asking you to follow your heart,” said his brother, “and do what you feel is right.” Tyrion reached out for his hand across the table, giving it a comforting squeeze. “Deep down, you have the answer, don’t you?”

“I’ll speak to her,” Jaime said, choosing to ignore the uncomfortable question and the mental image of him as a married man with Brienne by his side.

Soon after he had finished his meal with Tyrion, Brienne was the first person he sought, hoping he could find a way to explain things to her.

“I can’t believe you did that,” was her immediate reaction when he’d recounted the whole conversation to her the moment he’d set foot in her chambers.

“Have you even heard the foul rumours going around?” he asked, surprised that she could be this composed in spite of being informed of the menace encircling her.

“I prefer to ignore them,” she said, her expression stoic.

Jaime began pacing the room, his mind working on how to achieve the impossible task of breaking down her stubborn resolve and making her see reason. “My father called you a whore,” he told her, abhorring the association of the word with a woman chaste as her even as he uttered it, “and my sister--”

“It doesn’t matter to me, nor should it to you. I’m merely a guest here, soon to be gone, out of your sight, and--” she gave a little pause, lowering her eyes to the bedspread as she continued “--out of your life.”

“The Kingslayer’s whore,” he shouted, disturbed at the thought of being separated from her, more than the perilous situation they were both in, “that’s what they called you. Being known as a whore, by itself, is derogatory enough, and being labelled as my whore is an insult far beyond--”

“Ser Jaime--”

He paid no attention to her attempt to intervene, the need to get it all off his chest suppressing every other emotion within him. “Of course, being known as the Kingslayer’s wife isn’t any better either,” he went on, ashamed at the dishonour she’d been suffering on his account, “but I couldn’t stand and watch--”

“I’m not the Kingslayer’s whore, for you are no Kingslayer anymore, nor am I a whore,” she corrected him, her voice as eloquent as her eyes. “I’m Ser Jaime Lannister’s wife, and that’s what I’d prefer to be known as.” Her eyes burned bright, not with wrath or disdain, but with a quiet acceptance, a resignation to the situation that was no longer in her control.

Her reaction cornered him into stunned silence. “Really?” he couldn’t help asking, when he finally managed to emerge from his shell of confused emotions.

She flushed at once, her cheeks acquiring the familiar rosy hue that made her look almost beautiful in the pale glow of the fire. “I--” she stammered, pressing her lips together, an expression of nervousness that was so adorably typical to her. Gone was the confidence and the adamant stance she’d adopted a minute ago, as was the fire in her eyes, an almost-demure maiden standing before him instead of the fierce warrior he knew. “I didn’t mean it like that,” she mumbled, her gaze soft and abashed as she looked away from him.

“What, then, did you mean by that?” A part of him refused to let go of the way she’d acknowledged the undesired bond between them, the possessiveness with which she’d claimed to be his wife.
“Nothing,” she evaded, before steadying herself to go on. “What happens now?” she asked, doubt clouding her homely face, which, this morning, was far more appealing to him than Cersei’s flawless beauty.

Jaime took his time before finding her a suitable reply, his eyes dropping to her thick lips and her crooked teeth, the repeatedly recurring thoughts of kissing her senseless once again threatening to obliterate all logic in his head. His consciousness wandered, the dangerously delicious images of shoving her against the wall and pushing himself into her dancing all over his troubled mind since he’d undressed her at the inn last night.

“Ser Jaime,” she said, reminding him that she’d asked him something.

_I’m sworn to Lady Catelyn_, her words rang in his head, as did the significance of such a vow to her. A part of him disagreed with his brother, instructing him to do whatever it took to empower the wench to honour her word, to free her of this incarceration. The other half of him, his heart, advised him to elope with her to Casterly Rock, to keep her safe from the likes of Cersei, never to let her go. But Brienne’s word to Catelyn Stark was her life, and he wasn’t going to get in the way of her successful accomplishment of her quest, not when it meant so much to her. He knew she’d rather make an attempt to save Sansa and die at Cersei’s hands than stay with him all her life, forsaking her vow in favour of a domestic life.

A difficult choice to make, but he had made it, nevertheless, for that was the choice she too would have made. But his worry getting the better of him, he couldn't help hoping for a miracle, something to ensure her wellbeing along with her freedom.

“A few more days are all I ask of you,” he requested her, the seductive visions vanishing as quickly as they had emerged in his head, the exhilarating thoughts replaced by a crudely realistic projection of his future as his instinct foretold it to be. “I’m going to put my foot down and take a stand,” he announced his decision with a heavy heart. “I’m going to tell my father that I plan to go ahead with my appeal for an annulment.”

A ghost of a smile came upon her lips. “I’d be grateful for it, Ser Jaime,” she said, visibly relieved, “but you look troubled. What is it?”

“Nothing,” he said, mimicking her usual evasive tone.

“Tell me,” she insisted, her blue eyes melting him down, forcing him to cave in to her demands.

“If we don’t make our marriage public, it’ll displease father,” he said with a frown, unable to overcome his fear for her life. “While he will, in no way, harm you, I’m not too sure about Cersei.”

“Why will she bother to give me undue importance once I’m out of your way?”

_Because, deep down, she fears that you will, forever, stand between us, and that you, even without your presence in my future, will continue to influence me until the end of my days. She is well aware that I’m not the Jaime who left her at King’s Landing, and she has now realized that this is not the Jaime she wants. She wants her lover back, and strangely, I don’t think I want to be the man she wants anymore. One last thing, wench, she’s damn fucking sure that I’ve begun to care for you, and that I will continue to, long after you’ve left my side._

“She may not.” Jaime tried to think clearly, stamping down the barrage of thoughts that crowded his head. “But we can’t eliminate the possibility of her seeking you out the moment you leave the city. Once you leave, I lose track of you—” he fought hard to mask his frustration “--and once you’re no more my wife, you lose my father’s protection.”
“I can protect myself,” she assured him, “so don’t worry about that.”

“I know you can.” He hoped he was right.

But she continued looking at him, a frown building up despite the decision being in her favour. “There’s one more aspect to this that you’ve conveniently chosen to forget,” she said at last, piercing him with those eyes he just couldn’t look away from. “You still don the white cloak.” She glanced at his shoulder, reminding him of the doom that would soon unfold, her brows creasing into lines of disapproval.

He sighed deeply, reminded of the fate that would soon befall him. “I do.”

“When you appeal to the High Septon, when you reveal the secret of our marriage, will that not be held against you as a breach of a sacred vow?” she asked, her eyes telling him that she knew the answer.

“It will,” he said, every word he spoke a huge effort he had to expend.

“Is it not punishable by death?” she went on, her voice shaking.

“It is,” he answered her again, keeping his emotions in check.

The wench was on her feet too and she joined him in his little stroll around the room. “I’m ready to do as your father says,” she announced her decision, her abrupt change of mind throwing him off guard.

“You don’t have to--”

“I don’t have to,” she agreed, “but I am going to.”

Jaime vehemently shook his head, preparing himself for a long and arduous argument with her. “I can’t subject you to a life of bondage, the very life you’ve run away from home to escape from. Should you even choose to wed someday, I’m not the husband you should be trapped with.” He stopped pacing, halting before her to catch his breath. “I can’t let you be doomed to a life with me.”

“I know you detest taking this way out too, but I cannot let you break another oath!” she cried out, her liquid eyes having the power to bring him to his knees and do her bidding.

“And I can’t allow you to forsake yours,” he confronted her again, “for that’s what you’ll end up doing if you stay married to me.”

Brienne blinked a couple of times, her chin slightly wobbling as she went on, “We’ll think of something later. For now, tell your father that I’m ready to accompany you to Casterly Rock.” “And that--” she rubbed her palms against her trousers “--I’m ready for tonight’s ceremony.”

“He’ll soon start demanding heirs,” said Jaime, his mind jumping to the next problem waiting in the long queue to be sorted out.

Blood rushed to her cheeks again, painting her face his favourite shade of pink. “You can--” she faltered, fidgeting with her nails.

“What?” he prompted, curious to listen to her solution.

“Let a few days pass, and then you can tell him I’m infertile,” she suggested, blushing profusely. “You can appeal for an annulment on those grounds.”
“I can’t do that,” Jaime was quick to shoot down her idea, appalled by her stupidity and lack of consideration for her own future. “I’m not going to spoil your name and any chances you stand of a proper wedding, should you wish for one in the years to come.”

“I’m never going to get married,” she firmly told him, “so you might as well stop worrying about that.”

“We’re not doing as you say,” he continued to refuse, still shaken by her ridiculous sense of logic.

“Don’t you want to go back to your sister?” she asked, presenting a choice that would once have been the biggest temptation for him. “Don’t you want to stay alive for her sake?”

_I don’t know_, he mentally answered her, _I don’t even know what it is that I feel for her these days._

“Do it for Cersei,” she urged, taking his silence to be a positive reply to her question.

“I can’t--”

“--and for me,” she added, her flushed cheeks and the blue eyes that looked imploringly into his wiping out the very last dregs of opposition in his mind.

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Brienne stumbled, losing her balance and nearly making a fool of herself in front of a crowd gathered to appraise her, but checked herself on time, wondering if it was her heavy bridal gown to blame for her unladylike gait or the mounting unrest within her. As she walked down the path to matrimony for the second time in her life, she allowed herself to steal covert glances at her handsome husband who stood by the Septon, awaiting her arrival with his most charming smile. She caught his eye once, and he read her anxiety, assuring her with the slightest of nods that everything would be fine. All would soon be sorted out.

Every step she took in his direction reminded her of the first time they had promised themselves to each other, the rage and disgust and disdain that her heart had been so full of then, now nowhere to be found within her. Gone was all the negativity she’d so proudly borne, then, for him, and all she was left with now, was her nervousness and an inexplicable sense of excitement. Her eyes wandered across the vast expanse of the hall, and among the sparse crowd that had gathered to witness their union, she spotted Cersei in a corner. The queen mother was glaring at her, her reaction at once sending a flood of uneasiness through her, a feeling that she’d stolen something that wasn’t hers.

“Ease yourself,” Jaime whispered to her under his breath when she matched step with him, audible to none but her, “it’ll soon pass.”
It’ll soon pass, she took a deep breath, opening herself up to endure what was to come and allowing him to convince her, but do I want it to pass? The thought shocked her as it skimmed through her mind. Do I want this to end?

The Septon, fortunately, distracted her when he began the ceremony, and for the second time in her life, Jaime placed his cloak on her shoulders, the one he’d worn this time, a symbol of his house, bearing his sigil and his house colours.

I’m marrying Jaime Lannister this time, she realized, recalling the circumstances under which they had done this the last time, and not some non-existent Lord Mormont. Their identities had been a lie when they had wed under restraints, the fact all along providing her with some quiet comfort that their bond was unreal and nothing but a staged act to fool the world. But not this time. The implication of her impulsive decision slowly dawned upon her, the presence of Jaime’s entire family adding a certainty to what she’d so willingly volunteered for.

“I am his, and he is mine,” she mouthed, her eyes so deeply engrossed in his, that she saw little else, the people around her reduced to a mere speck in the distance.

“I am hers, and she is mine,” he murmured his part, returning her gaze with one so ardent that she feared her knees might give way and she might cave in again.

But none of that happened, and they continued regarding each other, oblivious to the world, uncaring of everything around them.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” proclaimed the Septon, beaming at them as he sealed their bond forever.

Relieved that she would soon be rid of the judging looks of the Lannister family and friends, Brienne hoped Jaime would lead her out of here, and just as they were about to get away, the king decided to make his presence felt.

“Not so fast,” he stopped them, smirking. “Kiss her, Uncle Jaime,” he demanded, “show us how much you love her.” His eyes shifted from Jaime to her with a look of revulsion spreading across his features, not unlike the one his father used to relish bestowing upon her during the early days of their acquaintance.

Struck by embarrassment and dread, Brienne wished for the ground beneath her to split and swallow her, thereby saving her the disgrace of being denied a kiss by her husband, for there was no way Jaime would dare lock lips with her in front of his family, particularly Cersei.

“Why the hesitation?” Joffrey mocked, the sarcasm in his tone unmistakable.

Her mind raced, working towards a respectable excuse to get out of there whilst saving Jaime from becoming the king’s unsuspecting target. She was about to pretend to faint, the only way to rescue them both from an awkward situation, but Jaime gave her no chance to execute her desperate plan, leaving her totally unprepared for what he was about to do. Before she could realize what was happening, his stump was around her waist, and he had drawn her into his arms. Her breathing quickened, and her throat ran dry, the words she’d meant to say evaporating into thin air, as did her nerves.

“Ja--Ser Jaime,” she croaked a feeble objection, but before she could manage another word, his palm was on her face, caressing her cheek and his lips were on hers.

He had kissed her before, once during their previous ceremony, the experience more a disgusting
ordeal than anything even remotely close to a display of affection, while his second attempt was a forced public show of their passion to a stranger. This was under duress too, but it felt vastly different this time. He was soft and aggressive, tender and passionate - all at once, a heady combination threatening to weaken her knees, leaving her on the brink of a collapse. She wanted to break away, to compel and convince herself that this wasn’t supposed to happen, that it wasn’t her fate to stand here with him, but her mouth seemed to have an opinion of its own, following his lead, giving in to him when his fingers began to lose themselves in her hair. Her eyes flickered shut of their own accord, and her lips slowly parted, granting the permission his tongue sought, allowing him to do with her as he pleased. Short of breath, she was soon panting into his mouth, while trying to devise a way to get over the pleasurable ache that hit her abdomen. This was heavenly and he was divine, the scent of him overpowering her as his breath mingled with hers, the taste of him conjuring indecent visions in her head.

A few, or perhaps, many seconds later, he released her, and it took her awhile to collect herself. “Forgive me,” he apologized, so softly that she had to read his lips to make out what he was speaking, “I had to make that convincing.”

Her mouth still parched, all she could manage was a faint nod in response. When she left the Sept with him, she felt light-headed and intoxicated, her legs floating in nothingness as she walked, while her mind was still trying to come to terms with what she’d just been through.

Of course, he had to make it convincing, she kept reiterating in her head, it meant nothing else, nothing more than his effort to save me from his family, his way of lying to his people that he does, indeed, want me, and that this marriage is, by no means, a temporary arrangement. That was what it was. It meant nothing. His kiss meant nothing. It wasn’t even a kiss. He may not approve of the things Cersei does, but loves her, and only her. No one can, and ever will replace her in his heart.

The idea that he was unattainable was oddly comforting, the constant reminder that he belonged to another woman keeping her grounded to what would soon be her eventual fate - her oath, her pledge of service, her lifelong allegiance to Lady Stark’s family. That was the only thing significant to her. Nothing else mattered.

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Supper wasn’t as grand an affair as a Lannister wedding feast should’ve been, so the newly-weds were, thankfully, left to themselves. While no one was too intrusive towards her, Brienne felt out of place dining with the family for the first time. Tywin Lannister kept mostly to himself, occasionally shooting her appraising glances, perhaps, wondering how his son could’ve made such a mismatch of a match. Joffrey was largely into himself, engrossed in whispering sweet nothings in Margaery Tyrell’s ear, while Cersei had her eyes fixed on her, her gaze going from disbelief to disgust to finally a look of pure loathing as the evening went by. Uncomfortable with the negative vibes being thrown off by her sister-in-law’s stares, she turned to the other side where Tyrion and Sansa sat. Sansa, as usual, poked at her food moodily, and Brienne felt sorry for the girl, painfully reminded of her oath at once. Tyrion was the only one who was genuinely pleased with this union, welcoming her into his family at every opportunity he could gather. He was all smiles, and the only one who, in every word to Brienne, oozed charm and warmth. He appeared to care adequately for his wife as well, taking care of her needs and coaxing her from time to time to get some food into her stomach.

The eating and drinking and merriment went on for a while, and time seemed to fly, as twilight soon turned into dusk, and dusk into late night. And then, it was time for them to retire to bed.

“Where are you going?” Jaime asked, when she headed in the direction of the passage that led to her chambers.
“My—” chambers, she was about to say, only then realizing the implication of his question. Speech once again betrayed her, and unsure of what to say, she stood there, her attention focussed on the emptiness in front of her.

“This way,” was the only thing he said, pointing in the opposite direction.

She followed him, or rather, her legs did, her mind refusing to comprehend anything. “You first,” he said, stepping aside to make way for her as soon as he pushed open the door to his bedchambers.

“I know this is difficult,” he said, the moment they crossed the threshold, “but we have no choice. You have to—”

“I understand,” she replied, her voice still coming out all hoarse and wrong. “We’ve shared a room many times in the past, this is just one more of such instances.”

“This time is different,” he pointed out, “we’re cohabiting tonight as man and wife.”

His words left her partly uncomfortable and partly apprehensive as she mulled over what was on his mind. “Now don’t you get any strange ideas—”

“I have no inclination other than putting up this show until you’re safely out of here,” he allayed her fears, before proceeding to perch on the massive bed that stood at the centre of the room.

Of course you don’t,

she bit back a groan, because you’re inclined towards none but your pretty sister. A pang of bitterness and jealousy flashed through her when she pictured him in bed with Cersei.

“This time is different,” he went on, pointed to a trunk sitting on a corner table, breaking the disturbing image her mind was bent on showing her. “Make yourself comfortable, and feel free to call this place your own.”

Brienne circled the bed, moving to the other unoccupied side. How many times has Cersei lain here? She ran her palm along the spotlessly clean bedspread, the thought of his sister filling her, once more, with an awful feeling she was intruding upon something private. This isn’t where I belong, and this doesn’t belong to me. He doesn’t belong to me--

“Thinking about Renly?”

She jerked her head in his direction, his mesmerising voice endangering the last vestiges of sanity left in her.

“I know what you’re thinking right now,” he continued, fixing her with a steady penetrating gaze as he approached her. “You’re silently wishing it was Renly instead of me, aren’t you?”

“I--” she was speechless, for Renly was as far away from her mind as the sun was from the moon.

“It’s quite late,” she decided to safely change the subject, “we must sleep if we are to get to training on time tomorrow.”

He chuckled, breaking the tension in the air. “One advantage of our marriage coming out in the open is that we don’t have to sneak out for our training sessions anymore.”

Feeling much more at ease now, she decided to call it a night without further ado. “Why don’t you change and go to bed if you have any hopes of lasting more than a couple of minutes against me tomorrow?” Rummaging into a pile of clothes arranged by her trunk, she picked up a set of
nightclothes and flung them towards him. “For a change, try and beat me instead of merely defending yourself,” she challenged, glad to have found her actual self again. “Aren’t you sick of losing to me?”

“I’d never be sick of losing to you, wench.” The deeply invasive look he gave her pierced through every barrier she’d put up, every wall she had erected to keep the likes of him at bay. “Losing to a skilled warrior like you is an honour, and I’m ready to go through it every single day, if need be.”

She quickly collected herself, refusing to succumb to his charms. “Not if you have any hopes of becoming the swordsman you once used to be,” she scolded. “Now off to bed,” she commanded.

Once again came the disarming grin that left her weak in the knees. “As you wish, my lady.” He began disrobing, and she stared at him, unabashed and mesmerised, the sight of him struggling with his clothes bringing back unforgettable memories of the embarrassingly intimate moments they had shared at that inn. Flustered at the recollection of the emotions that had surged through her that night, she immediately averted her gaze, shuffling clumsily to the trunk allocated to her in an attempt to get rid of her elaborate gown and find herself some comfortable clothes for the night.

“A little help here, wife?” he called out, and her heart skipped a bit, the prospect of touching him too much for her to bear.

“Do it yourself,” she shouted back, determined not to get anywhere within two feet of him.

“Gods, you’re inhuman, wench!” he cried out, his voice muffled, “I’m stuck--” she could hear a string of curses, followed by some whining and moaning “this--my hand,” he continued shouting, “my sleeve is entangled in this stupid hand and won’t come off. Now will you come help me or are you just going to be standing there, watching me strangle myself to death?”

Stifling a laugh, she reached over to his side. He, indeed, had made a mess of undressing himself, his shirt half off his body, the sleeve stuck in his golden fingers, while his limbs were a confused tangle above his head. She extricated his sleeve first, and then pulled his shirt back on, taking care to keep her eyes off the exposed patch of skin between his chest and his waist. “Let me take this off first,” she muttered to herself, unstrapping his golden attachment and tossing it aside on the bed before going on to take his shirt off.

“Now this is more like the wedding night I had always pictured in my dreams,” he remarked, and she stopped, the heat in his breath setting her skin on fire. “Not that I expect it tonight--” he stammered, his chest heaving as his breathing intensified “--or on any other night.”

Brienne drew in a sharp breath, and immediately took her hands off his chest, leaving his shirt intact. “I’ve sorted out the mess you made,” she said, hoping to get away before things could get worse, “do the rest yourself.”

Straightening herself, she was about to dash off in a hurry, but tripped on her unnecessarily long gown, ripping a huge tear in it. “Oww!” she exclaimed in pain when her foot twisted at an odd angle. Her ankle giving way, she lost her balance. Cursing under her breath, she prepared for her teeth to meet the hard ground, only to find herself in Jaime’s arms before she could collapse into a helpless heap. “Got you,” he whispered, helping her back to her feet. “We do seem to have made a habit of this, haven’t we, wife?” he teased, his face barely inches away from hers.

“Of what?” she asked, her attention to his handsome features diverted by his fingers that roamed her waist.

“When I slipped at the bath, you were there to hold me,” he said, reminding her of the fateful bath
they’d shared, “so now when you falter, how can I let you fall?”

“Let me go,” she implored, heat pooling between her legs as did the moisture within her core, leaving her wet and wanting and fervently hoping his hand would stop awakening the wild desires that had lain dormant within her, churning up needs she’d never known she had until he had touched her.

“Very well.” He immediately complied with her request and relinquished his hold on her. She hastily stepped away from him, keen to put as much space between them as possible, in the process, inadvertently putting most of her weight on her newly injured ankle, only for her to stumble into his arms again. “I swore a vow,” he said, this time, effortlessly picking her up, “to always be there by your side when you need me.”

“Put me down” she weakly insisted, her limbs out of order and her brain numbed, panic settling into every particle of her as he carried her to the bed.

“As you command, my lady.” He put her down on the side she had chosen has hers, and rose once she had comfortably settled down, only to take a seat by her feet. “Let me see how bad it is,” he murmured, lifting her injured leg and gently placing it on his lap. Pushing the dress to her knee, he began massaging her sore foot.

“What are you doing?” she squeaked, his hand doing far more than just alleviating her pain.

“Upholding my wedding vows,” he explained, “hoping to prove to you that I’m no oathbreaker anymore. Isn’t that what you expect of me?”

“This wasn’t what I meant,” she breathlessly clarified, “I don’t want you to--”

“I know. And I am well aware that this is as unfavourable to you as it is to me.” He lifted his eyes from her foot to her face. “All this apart, under normal circumstances, had this been a real wedding night, I’d have undressed you before shoving you on to the bed.” His fingers lost their way, sliding a few inches above where they were supposed to be, caressing her calf muscles while slowly inching their way up to her knee. “I’d be massaging far more than my wife’s foot,” he said with the slightest tilt of his chin, while his gaze dropped to her chest.

Her pulse quickened, his words building up yet another set of dangerously exciting images in her head. She battled her raging mind, forcing herself not to imagine what other parts of her body he could massage. “It’s not that bad,” she put him off, her voice fainter than a whisper. “I need no assistance.”

Jaime withdrew without the need to be told twice. “As you wish, my lady.” Getting up once again, he sat down by her side, exhaling dramatically. “I must be the most unfortunate man in the world,” he lamented, pulling on a pained expression.

“Why?”

“I’ve been fortunate enough to have enjoyed two wedding nights instead of one,” he explained, green eyes eyeing hers, “but unfortunate enough not to be able to bed my wife on either occasions.”

The fire in his eyes threatening to burn her to a cinder, she fought to keep calm, wiping her sweaty palms on her expensive dress. “Ser Jaime--”

He burst into peals of laughter, pointing his forefinger at her shocked face. “Look at you,” he said, still laughing. “I--I never thought you’d--” When his mirth had subsided, he spoke to her with a straight face, “Don’t worry, wench, I’m not interested.”
Cersei’s all you’re interested in... And in the blink of an eye, discomfort shock and awkwardness gave way to jealousy, an emotion she’d experienced on merely a handful of occasions- one such instance being when Renly had wed Margaery.

“I should change and sleep,” she announced, but when she made to get up, he caught her wrist, pushing her back onto the bed.

“Tell me, though,” he resumed the conversation, bending closer, “would you have found this marriage so undesirable had it been Renly in my place?”

“What makes you think so?” she asked, his proximity having its disturbing effect on her again.

“Your eyes,” he observed, leaning into her, so close now that she could make out every single hair on his beard, “they tend to tell me a lot, my lady, whether you want them to, or not. Whenever I look into them, they shout out the truth about you.”

“And what truth might they be telling you tonight?” she breathed, trying not to picture the kind of burns his beard would cause, if it were to rub against her sensitive skin.

“That you’re strongly attracted to him,” he guessed, “and that you are quite passionate about your feelings for him. You miss him so much, that you’re beginning to see him in me.”

The fact that Jaime had got her feelings utterly wrong didn’t help her one bit, but she thought it better not to correct him. “We’d rather not get into this.” She tried to slip away through the gap he’d left her, but he was quick to tighten the grip on her wrist whilst shifting such that he fully and properly blocked her exit. “Let me go, Ser Jaime,” she said, squeezing every bit of concentration she could gather into doing something as trivial as talking as she squirmed helplessly in his grasp.

“Not before you answer my question,” he persisted, his lips just a hair’s breadth away from hers. One touch - just one touch was all it would take to bring back the heady sensation she’d experienced at the Sept. “Tell me, Brienne,” he continued to interrogate her.

Her tongue seemed to have stuck on her palate, unwilling to budge, incapable of stringing two words together. “Tell you what?”

“Are you still in love with him?” he demanded, his eyes molten emeralds.

“Why do you keep asking me that?” she pushed back, relieved that he hadn’t suspected her distress had nothing to do with her first love. “How does it matter to you?”

“That’s no answer to my question, wench.”

“Yours isn’t one to mine either.” Pushing him out of the way, she jumped off the bed, grimacing when she landed on her sprained ankle, the physical pain far lesser of the many concerns that would deprive her of sleep tonight.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

The wedding night continues, though it's not exactly what you might expect, and so does Jaime's internal battle with his feelings leading to awkward situations, confrontations and more.

Chapter Notes

Warning : Loads of "torture" ahead, as some of you might put it, but I'd still like to call it fluff and UST. I've cautioned you, and I regret nothing ;)

Jaime made no effort to stop the wench this time, nor did he press any further about Renly. All he did was observe her in silence when she pushed past him and tried to make a hasty exit, an obvious move on her part to keep him at bay. But the very second she rested her foot on the ground, her sore ankle gave way, incapable of bearing the strain. “Shit!” she loudly cursed, her face twisting in pain when she lost her balance once again and crashed to the floor.

He leapt off the bed in concern, crouching by her side as he bent to check the severity of the damage.

“I can manage by myself,” she protested, folding her leg at once.

Unshaken by her resistance, he refused to relent, grabbing her arm and supporting her to her feet. “Sit down,” he commanded, in a tone akin to one he’d use with an overly defiant and disobedient child as he helped her to the edge of the bed. “Can I get you anything?” he asked, hoping she’d look upon him as more than just a pretend husband and give him a chance to assist her.

“No,” came her brusque reply, and she shrugged his hand off. Retreating to a corner of the bed, she increased the distance between them, resisting his touch and avoiding his gaze, a clear sign that she’d like to be left alone.

Alone and free to brood about Renly and mourn her love in solitude, guessed Jaime angrily, wishing that it were him instead of me on her marital bed tonight, kissing her, making love to her, showing her what it would feel like to be a woman. The longer he dwelled on thoughts like these, the more vivid the visions in his mind became, her undying affection for the long-dead king bothering him more than he’d like to admit to himself.

“I’m only trying to help, you don’t have to be difficult about it,” he sourly explained his intentions, trying to fathom the reason behind her suddenly cold demeanour towards him. Careful introspection and analysis told him that his unnecessary and incessant questioning about Renly could be the only reason for her aloof behaviour. He had crossed a line, stepped past a personal barrier he shouldn’t have breached. He continued to watch her withdraw into an invisible shell, hurt that his proximity and mindless interrogation had put her off so much that she’d now begun to shun him.

Her severe expression softened after a while, but she stayed put in the same position, refusing to meet his eyes. Brushing aside the hurt he was filled with at her hostile reaction, he made his way to the corner where her trunk lay. Shuffling through it, he found a pair of trousers and a comfortable
looking shirt. Recalling that he’d once seen her wearing such clothes for the night, he picked them up and took them back to her. “Here,” he said, handing her the crumpled bundle in his hand, “get out of that uncomfortable gown, and you’ll feel far better.”

Unable to focus elsewhere, he glanced at her from his perch on the bed as she began unlacing her bodice. His eyes caressed her fingers while they caressed her breasts, and he was left once again battling a steadily growing bulge in his pants and a burning ache simmering within him, a desperate yearning that had him wishing that he’d been granted the privilege of undressing his wife on their wedding night. He had his eyes locked on her when she wagged a war against the rest of the now clumsily draped gown, struggling to fight her way out of it while trying valiantly not to rip another tear in the expensive and exquisite silk.

“Let me help,” he found himself offering when she swore in frustration.

“No!” she snapped at him at once, shrinking immediately to her favourite corner of the bed.

Stung into silence, her reaction reminded him of their initial days of forced company when she’d looked upon him with disgust best suited for one’s worst adversary. This was exactly the way she used to cringe whenever he got within a foot of her, and while it had barely bothered him then, today it felt like a punch to his stomach. “Suit yourself,” he retorted, equally angry with her cold response. Leaving her to her fate, and to fight the damned battle with her clothes by herself, he sprang out of the bed, proceeding to occupy the chair at the other end of the room, hoping a few feet apart would help reduce the alarming effect she had on him.

While he pretended not to pay her any attention, turning to one side as he settled himself on the chair, he couldn’t resist the urge to monitor her progress out of the corner of his eye as he mused about the day’s happenings, admiring how much the gown suited the wench, despite her treating it like her enemy, appreciating how her eyes had looked about a hundred times lovelier when she’d walked down the aisle to join him at the Sept. The luckiest man in the Seven Kingdoms, I would have been, he thought wistfully, had this been a real wedding, had she been my wife, had I sworn to be hers forever and ever, until the end of my days.

A friend is all she is, he concluded, coming to terms with the truth of what there was between them, a friend for life, hopefully, a friend, unselfish enough to put my life and my honour before her own. All along, under the influence of his father and his sister, he’d grown to think that the whole world was self-centred, that me always came before you. But that was only until he’d met Brienne, and weeks of grudgingly tolerating her had shown him that there were people in this world who lived for others. First it was her blind love for Renly Baratheon, then a blind sense of dedication to Catelyn Stark, followed by her daughters after her death, and now she’d put aside the urgency of her duty for his sake. The woman who was the epitome of honour and principles had agreed to sacrifice a good part of her future and her freedom for a man with shit for honour.

Jaime kept glancing at her, half-angry and half-amused at her struggle and her refusal to accept his help. Her efforts bore fruit, and the dress finally came off, dropping to a messy pile at the foot of the bed, and she was left standing in her small clothes. Excitement shot through him, blood rushing down to his groin as she began to work on the last remaining pieces of cloth covering her modesty. His heartbeat intensifying by the second, his cock pulsated expectantly as he continued watching, until a small voice inside him began to nudge him, poking him and telling him that he was violating her trust by stealing glances at her when she’d been found his presence undesirable. His cheeks burning, he averted his eyes, granting her the privilege of privacy. Fighting the urge to look at and admire her, he fixed his gaze on the wall, hoping the bodily reactions this woman was evoking in him was merely a temporary effect.
Women, he’d come across in the past, plenty of them, infact, and many far prettier than the plain looking wench, and some of them, attractive whores he’d seen in varying states of nudity, courtesy his brother and the company he kept, but none of them managed to extract a second look out of him, let alone leaving him aroused and yearning for more like a man deprived of human touch. None, apart from Cersei, and even his beloved sister, he had come to realize, had lost her magical touch on him.

“I’m done,” she called out tersely, bringing him out of the world of his thoughts, “you can come now.”

“You can have the bed,” he said loudly, optimistic that the distance and a night away from her might do him some good. “I’m quite comfortable here.”

A long spell of tension-ridden silence ensued, after which she chose to announce her decision. “There’s no need to be so magnanimous.” Her tone was crisp, lacking the honeyed sweetness and the warmth it usually bore. “I’m no dainty girl, I’ve faced hardships and seen more rough floors than soft beds. I know you aren’t interested in anything but keeping up this ruse for as long as required, and nor am I.”

Of course, I’m not interested, he repeated what he’d categorically told her earlier, this time to doubly convince himself, wishing it were true, wishing that his rapidly growing attachment to her would break away soon. It was only a matter of time before she’d be cities away from him, so out of sight would definitely mean he would soon be able to manage to evict all traces of her from his mind, particularly thoughts, that, unfortunately, had him gaping at her like an idiot at every chance he could gather.

She’s still in love with pretty boy Renly, and there’s no way she’d ever look upon another man, he surmised, recalling the unease that had come over her the moment he’d brought up Renly, the mere mention of his name leaving her fidgety and flustered. What could possibly be so special about the man apart from the stray kindness he’d shown her when she was a girl? And what about what she thought of Jaime? Could he ever rise to that level? Renly, perhaps, had never deserved Brienne or the undying devotion she harboured for him, but neither did he. A pure and good-hearted woman like her was worthy of someone far better than him and all the dishonourable acts he’d committed all his life. He’d crippled a child, for fuck’s sake, just to preserve his sister’s honour and keep their illicit relationship under the sheets, as it ought to have been, and he’d killed his cousin in the most brutal manner one could imagine, all for just a few fleeting moments of freedom. In her eyes, Renly had never caused harm to another being, not even to hide his diverging interests and proclivities from his beautiful wife, one who was his only by name.

She’s never going to elevate me to the level Renly is at, not tonight, not in the future. Never. He’s her first and only love, and will always be, for love doesn’t have a place anymore in her life. Nor will any man occupy her heart ever, Jaime brought himself to accept this grim reality, a heart that is so full of Renly Baratheon, that there’s hardly any room for another to try and step in.

Shrugging off his bitterness for the handsome king who taunted him from beyond the grave, Jaime marched up to the wench, eager to make peace with her, for he had no wish to antagonize her or upset her on this special night. “It’s been a stressful day for both of us,” he began, hoping he sounded positive, “and we need some rest.”

“Right,” she agreed, her tone much calmer than before. Dressed in her usual clothes, she appeared to be back to her normal self now, a stark contrast to the uncomfortable bride she was a while ago.

“My apologies,” he went on, ignoring the lump in his throat that was obstructing his ability to speak, “I didn’t mean to pry about Renly. It is not my place to ask you things about him that you do not
“wish for me to know.”

Brienne straightened the moment he had uttered those words, her eyes focussed on the bed and her fingers playing with each other, a definite sign of confusion and restlessness. Unsure of what was running through her mind, he caught his breath, hoping she’d overlook his insolence and his unhealthy curiosity about what she really felt about Renly. “I’m sorry too,” she almost swallowed her words, looking up at him at last, the pretty eyes bearing a faint tinge of guilt in them. “There was no need for me to overreact when all you did was just offer to help.”

Offer help. That was all I did…

“Shall we call a truce then?” he asked, ignoring his screaming brain, shutting himself away from the evil parts of his mind that planted indecent ideas all over his head, keeping out the loud voices that pounded his head, incessantly coercing him to grab her and kiss her until she fainted.

She nodded in agreement. “Goodnight, Ser Jaime.” Her words signalling the end of their conversation, she settled down in the corner she’d proclaimed earlier as hers.

“You have a good night too, my lady.” Remembering his usual habit to sleep with only his trousers on, he began peeling his shirt off.

Brienne sprang to a sitting position at once, her eyes widening with shock. “What are you doing?”

“Taking my shirt off,” he stated the obvious, confused by the strange look that came over her face.

“I can see that,” she observed, her gaze wandering to his chest when he rid himself of the garment. “But why?”

“Because it’s bloody hot in here,” he replied, oddly satisfied at the distress his state of undress was causing her.

The wench gulped and turned away at once, choosing to face the wall rather than look at him. Whether she was impressed at the sight of his bare chest or revulsed, he could not tell, for he was no expert at reading women, but what he definitely hoped for, was the former. “Does it bother you?” he asked, immediately succumbing to the temptation to kindle the confusion within her, seizing an apt opportunity to watch her turn all pink and stammer and allowing himself the pleasure to witness her seamless transformation from a mighty warrior to a blushing maiden. “Worried that you might fall for my charms and cuddle up to me during the night?” he kept up the teasing, only to have her toss him her fiercest possible glare.

“You wish,” she angrily muttered under her breath, and his efforts were rewarded. While her eyes spouted fire, he watched with bated breath as her cheeks went from the mildest shade of pink he’d ever seen, to the brightest red that could put a pile of burning coals to shame.

Oh I do, don’t I?

Making an effort to suppress a groan, he took to searching her face for the actual reason behind her reaction, his brain exploding with thousands of burning questions - ones he desperately craved answers to, despite being painfully aware that he wouldn’t get any.

“Goodnight, wench,” he said, sticking to the safest response possible as he blew off the candles on the table beside them before disappearing under the sheets. Shutting his eyes tightly, he allowed himself to drift away, hoping for a wenchless night and a few peaceful hours of sleep.

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Jaime opened his eyes to a semi-dark room, the silvery streaks of moonlight striking him through the gaps in the window reminding him that there were a good many hours to go until the new day would make its presence felt. Sinking into his pillow once again, he was about to delve into the realm of his dreams, when his attention was diverted to the strangely arrhythmic breathing beside him, the only sound in the deathly silence of the night apart from the odd insect flexing its antennae, or the occasional toad or two croaking away Merrily. Struck by a sudden need to check on his companion for no particular reason, he opened his eyes again, only to find Brienne sitting on the bed, leaning against the pillow as she breathed heavily.

Even in the dim light, he could make out the agitation in her eyes. “Nightmare?” he asked her softly, anger bubbling inside him as he clenched his fist, wishing the worst possible fate for Locke and his savage mates.

Brienne nodded wordlessly, reluctant to bring herself to meet his eyes. Shedding all his inhibitions and apprehensions of how she might perceive his actions, he shuffled next to her. “Come here,” he murmured, draping an arm around her shoulders in a bid to comfort her and alleviate her pain.

“I’ll be alright in a while, Ser Jaime.” Unlike the first time he’d comforted her, she tried to resist, but he would have none of it, her decision to suffer silently tearing him to bits. What good was a friend if he couldn’t offer comfort to a troubled soul?

“Do you trust me, Brienne?” His tone was soft and tender, and his hold on her steady.

“More than anyone else,” she promptly replied, resting her head on his shoulders. “More than myself, Ser Jaime.”

“Sleep then,” he said in a soothing voice, gently squeezing her arm, “let go of all your troubles, and allow me to share them with you.” She shifted closer, sinking into him even further. “A husband, I may not be to you, despite the promises we’ve made to each other more than once, but I do hope you consider me a friend, for I swear to uphold that vow to you, to upkeep this fragile, but beautiful bond of friendship that we share.”

“You are,” came her muffled response, amidst the hot air she exhaled into his neck, “the best, and perhaps the only true friend I’ve ever had.”

Overwhelmed by the trust she placed in him, Jaime was driven to silence, for never before had someone so unconditionally believed in him, believed that he could do good for them. He held her while she relaxed against him, her breathing slowly stabilizing as time ebbed away. Whilst she wasn’t yet asleep, his touch definitely seemed to calm her nerves.

“Imagine for a moment,” he tentatively began, worried at her reaction as he was about to bring up the subject that often led to turbulence in their conversations, “that I’m Renly, and this is the marriage, the wedding night you’ve dreamed of all your life.”

He wanted to go on, but her breathing became more laboured, and for an agonizing second, he was worried he had agitated her further instead of being of help to her. “Go on,” she prompted, much to his surprise when he’d decided to drop the matter.

“What would you have done?” he put forth his question without further ado, eagerly anticipating her response.

Brienne lifted her head slightly to look him in the eye. “I’d have surrendered myself to him,” she disclosed, her voice breathless and barely audible, “I’d be lost in his arms by now, my suffering and woes far behind, never to bother me again.”
Jaime pulled her closer. “Like this?” he went on in a tone akin to hers, his eyes absorbing her intense gaze, burning in the fire they spewed at him.

She hummed in response, in affirmation, he presumed. “I’d have shared my dreams with my husband,” she continued, huddling against him as a little smile appeared at the corners of her mouth, “I’d perhaps have mustered the courage to dream new dreams with him--” the smile widened and she slipped into a blissful trance, her face radiant as the full moon outside “--a life with him by my side, surrounded by our children--”

“How many?” he found himself asking, suddenly picturing himself with the wench in a keep by the seas of Tarth, surrounded by about half a dozen children of varying sizes and ages.

The blush on her cheeks was distinctly visible even in the poor light. “Two, maybe.”

“Only two? Don’t you think that’s unfair, wench?” he teased, pretending to take offense. “What if I wanted seven?” The thought led to his brain drifting into another of those dangerous visions.

She turned an adorable shade of red. “Too many,” she dismissed his wish, “but that apart, I--” she trailed away with a shy smile and her eyes bright with love, an emotion he’d never seen her express this blatantly before.

*Love for the wretched king, of course.*

“What else?” he pressed further, pushing aside his jealousy for Renly, aching to know what was on her mind.

“I’d have wished for this night to never come to an end,” she breathed, unblinking, “for you to hold me forever in your arms,” she admitted, leaving him wishing for a moment that she was talking about him , and not Renly.

“And?” he went on, wanting this night to never end, hoping he could hold her like this forever, for as long as she wished.

“I’d have looked forward to a kiss to begin my wedding night,” she rasped, her eyes still set on his.

“And I’d very much wish to oblige you with one,” he confessed, his tone mirroring hers as he unveiled the deepest desire of his heart whilst trying his best not to make it appear to be a confession.

She succumbed to another bout of deep breathing, and he could feel the rhythmic movement of her body against his. “You did kiss me, at the Sept--”

“That was no kiss at all, but a mere formality to convince the king and the rest of the skeptics,” he pointed out, in spite of the unending ill effects that so-called non-kiss had on him. “If you want to know what a real kiss feels like--” Only then did he realize that his lips were barely an inch next to hers.

*This is all about Renly, his brain reminded him of the harsh truth again, not me. She wants to kiss him.*

“I--I mean Renly would have kissed you,” he quickly brought himself back on track, “if he’d loved you.”

“He would never--” She faltered, floundering around for words. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have gone this far with my girlish imagination.” Flustered, she looked away. I--”
“Try to get some sleep,” he whispered, not desiring to be the cause of her uneasiness.

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This time when Jaime opened his eyes, it was to the golden rays of the rising sun that found their way through the open drapes of his window. Suddenly aware of the oddly satisfying weight on his body, he focused on the gentle breathing of the woman in his arms. Bending, he smiled as he caught a glimpse of Brienne’s golden locks reflecting the shining streaks of light as her head rested comfortably on his chest. The look of serenity and bliss on her face, one that could only be associated with dreamless sleep told him that she was at peace, and that meant more than anything else to him. That he’d been able to facilitate a peaceful night’s sleep for his friend filled him with more satisfaction than the most prestigious conquest his sword had ever achieved.

She stirred, her fingers tickling his chest hair as she gently caressed his skin, and he twitched, the touch having its anticipated effect on his cock. Even fully clothed, she managed to have this pleasurable effect on him. Forbidden pleasure, he realised, for every word she’d spoken last night was meant for Renly - the only man she’d ever loved. And she’d made it plain as the waters of the Blackwater that there would never be another.

*Damn,* he cursed to himself, wishing Brienne wouldn’t have thrown away her life for the sake of people who far from cared for her. First Renly, then the Starks - she had unconditionally pledged herself to them, but neither of them recognised the devotion she held for them, nor did they--

“I love you,” she purred into his chest, her lips rubbing against his coarse hair, her words, more than her touch, startling him out of his musings.

His eyes so wide that they threatened to pop out of their sockets, he was unable to breathe for a few seconds. All he could do was stare at her in disbelief as she wrapped her legs around him, smiling in her sleep. “I love you,” she repeated, knocking the air out of his lungs again. Stunned to the point of temporarily losing the ability to speak, he said nothing, did nothing and showed no reaction at all. When he recovered enough to think, he let himself float in an imaginary bubble, assuming for a few fleeting seconds that her words were meant for him, the feeling, though unreal, making his heart expand to twice its size.

When at last, she opened her eyes, she peered at him sleepily through half-open lids, her expression blank as she tried to take in her surroundings. “I love you,” he whispered back, unthinking, for his brain was still trying to comprehend whatever had hit his ears a while ago.

The blank face immediately transformed, shock and disbelief mingling with horror shadowing her features the moment the words had escaped his lips. “W--What?” she stuttered, now fully awake.

“I love you,” he mindlessly reiterated. “Um--” he stammered, his throat suddenly dry and in need of a drink when he realized what he’d just done. “That’s what you told me in your sleep,” he admitted, hoping this would save him the embarrassment of facing her later.

Her crimson face bathed in the rays of the morning sun made her even more enticing and irresistible. “I--” she tried to speak, but like him, words seemed to fail her too. “I’m sorry,” she made an effort to be coherent, and her apologetic tone, once more, reminded Jaime that there stood a man named Renly Baratheon who would always rule her mind and her heart, day and night, in consciousness and sleep, and none but him would ever be the recipient of such rare pearls of affection that slipped past her lips. “That was--”

“--just a dream?” he supplied dully, the momentary bubble inside him bursting as easily as it had blossomed into existence. “I suppose you were enjoying a lovely dream about Renly,” he clarified
for her benefit, fighting to keep the bitterness and acrid tinge off his voice.

“Y--yes,” she agreed, with what appeared to be relief washing over her features.

Seconds went by with neither of them saying a word. Then she got off him and straightened her clothes, pressing her hair into place as she took extra care to avoid his eyes. Jaime followed her out of the bed, and as he reached for his shirt, he couldn’t help wondering how much longer the dead king would continue to haunt him and taunt him from wherever he was. Peace prevailed after that, with both of them keeping to themselves as they went about their morning ablutions, bathing and dressing in silence for their usual training session. Awkward though it was, Jaime found himself looking forward to spending every minute of his free time in the wench’s company, wishing this arrangement could continue forever.

“I’m ready. We can leave if you are,” she announced, once dressed in her usual men’s garb. Jaime allowed himself a proper look at her. “I’m not sure father would approve of his daughter-in-law dressing like this,” he remarked, wishing he could see more of his wife in womanly clothes. In his opinion, Septa Donyse had done a pretty good job of getting the seamstresses to assemble clothes befitting her height and structure.

“It doesn’t matter to me what anyone thinks,” she retorted, and Jaime had to hide a smile, her reply increasing his regard for her a thousandfold.

His lips pursed in a smile he concealed from her, he swung the door open. “As you wish, my lady,” he conceded, holding the door ajar for her to step out first.

Her gait more ungainly than usual, thanks to her damaged foot, she made her way out of the room, taking one cautious step at a time. She was able to walk without his support, no doubt, but any excess stress on her injured ankle made her grimace in pain, and Jaime was quick to take note of her discomfort. “Are you sure you can manage with that foot?” he asked doubtfully, concerned about her recovery and worried that he might cause her more agony by subjecting her to an intense hour of sparring.

“Of course I can,” she gruffly brushed away his concern, “I’m no weakling, I’ve been trained to sustain injuries worse than something as trivial as a stupid sprain.”

And once more, he couldn’t help admiring her grit, her determination and stubbornness to prove she was unbreakable filling him with awe for her. “I never implied you were a weakling,” he pacified her, “far from it, actually.”

They rode away into the rising dawn, and Jaime, for once, was relieved that he wouldn’t have to hide being seen with her anymore. They could ride together, spar together, take long walks in each other’s company, and do so much more without ever being questioned or spoken ill of. Short lived though her presence in his life may be, he still had a few more precious days to spend with her, weeks, if he was lucky, and he hoped to make the most of every second of it.

Train, they did, though this morning’s duel was as pathetically one-sided as could be. The husband and the friend in Jaime made him tread carefully, measuring every stroke as he tried not to aggravate her pain, but the swordsman in him, at times, got carried away, resorting to ruthlessness and every chance he could avail of to put her down, desperate to prove to her that he wasn’t as useless with a sword in his wrong hand as the world perceived him to be.

She grunted every time he lunged at her, their roles this time reversed, as she took to defending whilst he attacked, her face contorting with pain whenever she rested her weight on her sore foot. He
could feel her strength waning and her resolve slowly diminishing, and taking this as the best opportunity he could gather, he flung himself at her, cornering her to a nearby tree.

“Yield,” he growled, his sword tip pressing into her neck as she struggled and squirmed against him, the untimely movements of her hips and her limbs arousing him out of his battle-weary state and into something else, something he’d never thought this woman would so frequently drive him into, with just her slightest touch threatening to ignite him and reduce him to a useless heap of ashes.


“I’m good, aren’t I?” he boasted, stepping away from her and admiring his handiwork which amounted to her heavy breathing and her sweat-covered body.

“You’ve improved,” she panted, “but I’d still like to see you reduce me to a pile of helplessness when my foot has recovered, rather than gloat after taking advantage of an injured opponent.”

“You’re envious,” he mischievously egged her on, “you hate it that you didn’t prevail this time.”

“I’m not,” she immediately denied, her flushed face and shining eyes telling him exactly the opposite.

“You are,” he continued mercilessly, “look at you, you’d like nothing better than to strike me down and--”

Gritting her teeth, she shut her eyes, forcing herself into a state of composure. “We ought to leave,” she announced, limping towards the staircase. She stumbled once, and instinct told him to grab her, to keep her safe and sound. Intending to do exactly that, he advanced towards her, but she held out a firm hand to stop him, keeping her balance this time. “I need no assistance,” she categorically declined his offer for help.

Stupid, stubborn wench, he muttered in his head, you’d rather die of pain than do as I say.

“It doesn’t hurt to accept help at times,” he advised her, unable to witness her suffering.

“I know,” she said, “but I’d rather manage on my own. You aren’t going to be with me all my life, are you?”

That was no question, surely, but Jaime found himself wishing it was.

He left it at that, and they trudged along in silence in the direction of their mounts, with Brienne compelling herself to advance at a terribly sluggish pace, taking one painful step after another. Several times Jaime was tempted to force-feed her with his assistance, and several times he nearly came close to inflicting himself upon her, but knowing her fierce adamance, he held back, biting away his helplessness, reminding himself to stay away when he noticed her jaw stiffen as she mounted her steed with great difficulty.

The ride back home was uneventful, and they left their horses at the stables, making their way up the staircase to their chambers. “Seven hells!” she winced again, clutching the railing as she stopped for a second.

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” Jaime swore loudly, unable to take her nonsense anymore. “You’re going to hate me, and probably kick me into oblivion for this, but I can’t stand by and watch you suffer in stubborn silence.” Her vacant expression told him that she sought an explanation for what he’d just proclaimed, but rather than launch into a long winding reasoning for what he was about to do, he simply decided to act.
“Stop it,” she cried out, craning her neck to frantically skim through her surroundings for passersby the instant he scooped her in his arms and began carrying her up the stairs.

“Only after I make sure you’re back to the safe confines of our room,” he declared with obstinance equalling hers.

“But--” she began to protest, but he would have none of it.

“For a change, stop being mulish and listen to me,” he commanded in exasperation, making his way up, one step at a time, his struggling arguing wife making his progress annoyingly difficult.

“Let me go, Ser Jaime,” she continued waging a war against his attempts, “this is--”

“--absolutely unnecessary and a shameful act in full view of onlookers,” said an icy voice ahead of them. “Such a bawdy show of romance, indeed. I never thought you’d behave like a petty lad of ten and six, brother,” Cersei condescendingly commented, her eyes spitting fire at the two of them as she stood in their way.

“Put me down,” Brienne whispered under her breath, her face reddening as Cersei carried on glaring at her, “believe me, I can walk.”

He was about to do as she said, but the anger eating through his insides commanded him to disobey her just for the cheap sense of victory it would fill him with, and do the exact opposite. He felt compelled to hold on to her, if not anything else, just to spite his sister for her childish interference. “She’s my wife,” he announced defiantly, having no intention of releasing the wench. “I have every right to hold her in full public view, not to mention doing whatever else we both may wish for, onlookers be damned.”

The outcome of his flippant outburst was a spectrum of contrasting emotions on the faces of the two women before him. Cersei went pale, her face devoid of blood, whereas Brienne turned a delightful shade of red. “I can’t believe you’ve decided to stoop this low, Jaime,” Cersei hissed, slowly descending one step at a time as she approached them. “This wretched woman, this wench of all the women you could lay your hands on--”

“Careful,” Jaime warned her, his blood boiling with rage and disgust, “that’s my wife you’re pointing fingers at, the Lady Lannister of Casterly Rock. Treat her with the respect she deserves.”

“Ah, now she holds a position of higher significance than me,” his sister observed, malice marring every pore of her once beautiful face.

“Ser Jaime, let me go at once,” Brienne kept pleading in his ear, “there’s no need for this confrontation. I’ll just leave and--”

“Why don’t you do as she says?” Cersei was just one step away from them now, her eyes boring into Brienne’s as though she wished nothing more than to cut her down and feed her to the crows. Fear stabbed him again as he was reminded of his horrible nightmare, and he set his wife down, seeing sense in her advice to avoid letting the argument get out of hand and beyond control.

“Lady Brienne,” said Cersei, directing her frozen tone at his wife, “if you could be kind enough to leave my brother alone for a while and restrict your--” She halted, gathering an eyeful of the woman she looked upon as her adversary. Whilst her tone was soft and polite, her expression soured again, her nose crinkling in distaste when she went on. “Whatever you were up to with him before I made the mistake of walking in on you, I’d request you to keep it to the confines of your bedchambers.”

“You’re mistaken, your grace. We were up to nothing of that sort,” Brienne made a futile attempt to
offer her an explanation, “Ser Jaime was just--”

Cersei held out a hand, immediately driving Brienne to silence. “I need you to leave,” she curtly ordered her, the artificial courtesy in her tone making way for cold contempt, “now.”

Determined not to let her out of his sight, Jaime was about to shout out an objection, but Brienne caught his eye, giving him a slight nod, urging him to keep his nerve. If she wanted to kill Cersei, and knowing her, he was almost certain that she did, she didn’t show it, her face an epitome of calm and peace. “Your grace,” she said, attempting something that was a cross between a bow and curtsy, and continued hobbling up the stairs, leaving him at the mercy of his sister.

“I must go too,” he muttered with a sudden sense of urgency, hoping he could follow his wife, but Cersei blocked his path.

“Don’t you think this is getting out of hand?”

“What is?” Jaime feigned ignorance, unwilling to accept defeat at her hands.

“This marriage game that you’re playing,” Cersei explained, her tone telling him that her patience was thinning. “While it is fine for children like Myrcella and Tommen, it doesn’t become your age, Jaime, not when you’re soon going to abandon her.” A malicious glint appeared in her eyes, followed by a wicked smile on her lips. “Father’s decision be damned, what’s going to happen when you’re eventually going to break her heart?” she inquired, her voice dripping with sadism. “Will you be able to watch her deflated face when you reveal the truth to her, the ultimate reality and the directive of fate? What is to become of her when you tell her that you’re mine, and not hers?”

Jaime studied her closely, carefully measuring every word of his response. “Why do you assume I’m going to abandon her one day?” He watched her expression darken, every cell of her body burn with a fresh burst of loathing for Brienne. “I swore a vow, Cersei, to protect her until the end of my days,” he said dreamily, his mind instantly jumping to the wonderful moment in the Sept. “What if, for a change, I decided to uphold my vows instead of foregoing them? What if, I strived to become the oathkeeper I never was?” he added, reminded of the honour the wench had decided to bestow upon him, naming her sword after the virtue he was yet to prove he possessed.

Every line, every crease of her pretty face radiated cold fury. “Jaime--”

“She’s my wife, Cersei,” he went on, undeterred by her attempt to intimidate him, “and I’d go to any extent to make sure she’s taken care of and safe, for as long as she’s here.” Unperturbed by the venomous stares she was throwing him, he gently pushed her out of his way and made his way upstairs. “One more thing,” he said, turning on his heel one last time to meet her blazing gaze, “please do not insult her henceforth. It doesn’t become you to speak ill of your sister-in-law.”

After that, he left, satisfied that he’d given her a piece of his mind. He rushed to his chambers, hoping to seek Brienne out and apologize to her for his sister’s insolence, but she wasn’t to be found in their chambers. Concluding that she was, perhaps, out to meet with Lady Olenna or Margaery Tyrell, Jaime began getting dressed, preparing himself to encounter yet another gruelling day at work. While he had, officially, discarded the white cloak, the responsibility of the royal wedding was still upon him, and until his successor was chosen, he’d been asked to continue with his duties, so as to avoid disruption or disturbances for the big day to come. With just a day to go, work schedules were beginning to get intense day by day, and given his role as the supreme in-charge of the king’s protection, he considered it a privilege whenever he could manage more than a couple of hours of sleep a night.

The day went by, with him confined to the White Tower, the perils of his new weakened status
telling on him as he found it increasingly difficult to deal with his own men, some of whom lacked
the trust that a one-handed man like him could lead them to success. I’ll soon be out of it, he
motivated himself, reminding himself repeatedly that he had just another day to spend in this tower.

Hours slipped by like water through a leak, and soon it was dark outside, well past the time for
dinner. Winding up, he locked his office and trudged along the empty passages. Fatigue wearing him
out by the time he’d entered his chambers, he flung the door open, only to find the sight that met his
eyes jerking him wide awake and restoring him to his full sensory alertness.

Brienne was standing in front of the mirror, clad in the most stunningly attractive dress he’d ever set
eyes on, critically scrutinizing her reflection as she turned left and right, keen to detect flaws in what
she saw.

“Ser Jaime,” she breathed, straightening herself clumsily the moment he stepped in. “I didn’t
anticipate you this early, I’m supposed to wear this for the royal wedding and I--”

Jaime heard nothing of anything she said after that, gaping at her open-mouthed, marvelling at how
perfect the dress looked on her. Blue, as usual, it wasn’t much different from the wedding gown
Septa Donyse had chosen for her. Sewn out of the most delicate silk he’d come across, the little
sapphires that adorned it shone like little moons reflecting the oceans that were her eyes. The low cut
of the bodice enhanced her modest breasts, leaving nothing and everything to his imagination. While
the fitting was almost accurate, a little more perfection could be achieved, he decided, recalling every
curve under that dress, every freckle and every scar that graced her pale skin.

“Ser Jaime,” she called for his attention again.

“Sorry,” he mumbled when his tongue un-froze, “I should have knocked--”

“Never mind,” she said, searching his eyes for an opinion. “Is this--”

“--apt,” he said, wanting to use a far more descriptive word, but checking himself to avoid coming
across as a gaping idiot. “But--” He sauntered over to her, wanting to make just a few minor
adjustments in what looked like a garment that was born for her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, facing the mirror once again as he stood behind her.

“The fit,” he remarked, critically examining the fabric that hugged her curves. “It just needs to be a
little tighter--” He lay his palm on her waist, and she stiffened at once, her breathing getting heavier
as he added, “here.” Using his fingers, he tightened the dress by a couple of inches, bunching the
excess fabric within his fist while mentally appreciating the contours of her body. Despite
having made his point, he refused to let go, his fingers rubbing her body over the fine silk.

“It’s fine,” she replied, twitching slightly every time he moved his hand, “Septa Donyse--”

“--has done a marvellous job,” he complimented the woman, mentally blessing her for her insight
and her impeccable taste in clothes. “However, she ought to have taken your measurements more
carefully. Maybe she could’ve sought me out for a lesson or two.” Moving his hand upwards, he met
her ribs. “This needs to be altered as well,” he breathed, reaching out for the laces of her bodice, his
fingers kissing past them as he made a conscious effort to avoid caressing her breasts, “a little more
shape it needs, don’t you think?”

Her breathing quickened and she shivered despite the warmth of the fire, but only for a passing
moment. “Y--yes, perhaps,” she eventually replied, and he immediately stepped away, putting a
couple of feet of distance between them, unable to decide which was worse - the worry that she
might be repelled by his proximity or the fear that with another second of close contact with her, he might end up making an inappropriate move.

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The day of the wedding dawned, and with it began the test of Jaime’s abilities, a chance to prove his worthiness to the world. The ceremony went through without any hindrance, following which it was time for the royal feast. He patrolled the grounds, keeping a close eye on the king and anything and everything that might seem suspicious. With duty eating into most of his mental and physical reserves, he had no time to dwell on how pretty the wench looked in the tailor-made dress, altered to his specifications the moment he’d explained his requirements to Septa Donyse and the bevy of seamstresses who had surrounded Brienne last night, answering her summons and busying themselves to do everything required to make her look like the lady of the house.

Even now, even in the midst of the crowd and the musical chaos, he found himself catching a glimpse or two at his wife, his admiration fighting for dominance in his mind over his gradually mounting apprehension when he recalled his defiant conversation with Cersei. His gaze flew to his sister off and on, and every time he saw her, her eyes were fixed on Brienne. He’d heard of familial conflicts between new brides and their sisters-in-law, but the one in his family beat them all.

His mind leaving the king and his surroundings for a while, he began racking his brain to devise ways of keeping the wench safe until they left for Casterly Rock, when he was rudely interrupted by an ear splitting scream. Pushing the crowds apart, he fought for a glance, only to find Joffrey sprawled on the ground, bleeding profusely through his nostrils and mouth.

“No,” he shouted, once he was past the initial shock, rushing to his son and his sister who was crouched by his side, sobbing as she held his hand. Before he breathed his last, the king pointed a bloody finger at his brother, collapsing in his mother’s arms soon after.

“It’s him,” Cersei screamed, her eyes shooting daggers at Tyrion. “He killed my son. Arrest him,” she ordered the white cloaks.

In the state of mounting hysteria that she was, Jaime thought it futile to make her see sense, to make her understand that it wasn’t Tyrion who was responsible for her son’s gruesome end.

He decided to try, nevertheless, when he saw one of his own cuffing his little brother, but before he could protest, Cersei turned her fiery eyes on Brienne. “Take her too,” she commanded, much to Jaime’s horror, “she’s one of them, an accomplice.”

“Cersei, stop this at once,” he objected, appalled at the ominous turn of events and her blunt accusation.

“She came here to avenge Catelyn Stark,” his sister shrieked, leaving Brienne stunned and rooted to the spot, “that’s why she bewitched my brother and married into this family. To get close to my loved ones, to conspire with Tyrion and plot my son’s murder.” Gritting her teeth, she raised her voice even further, and Jaime’s blood ran cold in his veins. “Throw her into the dungeons.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Things happen. Decisions are taken. Promises are kept.

Chapter Notes

So here it is after a delay :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time had come to a standstill, horror and helplessness leaving him speechless and stranded where he was. For a few agonizingly endless moments, Jaime could do nothing but stare at his sister in stupefied silence.

Twice within the span of minutes, he had the misfortune of standing by as a mute witness to injustice. The two people who mattered to him the most were being unfairly accused of crimes they’d never dream of committing, the allegations reducing them to unfortunate victims of his sister’s thirst for revenge and justice. Both times, he was nothing but a petty observer, compelled to stay put where he was and watch, his inability to improve the situation, except shout out useless protests, rendering him helpless and ashamed, and not to mention, reluctant to face them. On one side was the little brother he’d sworn to protect from the bullies who had tormented him as a boy, whilst on the other was the woman he’d wed twice, chanting the vows that were expected of him as merely an act of formality, not knowing when his wrist was bound to hers that he’d end up sharing an inexplicable bond with her. The promises he had made to protect her and never let go of her hand swept to the foreground of his mind, taunting him and mocking his incapability to defend his wife when the predators around her swooped in to claim their share of the hunted.

“You won’t touch her,” he shouted over the din to no one in particular, but his threats were lost in the noise, and the knights who had once bowed to him advanced towards Brienne. “Cersei, this isn’t right,” he tried to reason with her, but anguish and the boiling hate in her had driven her insane and dangerously capable of going to any extent to avenge her son.

“Go on, Ser Meryn,” she commanded with added malice, her eyes burning with a desperation to quell the misery in her, “take her away, and do what you deem fit with her for the time being.” She turned to Jaime, the hardened look in her eyes challenging him to counter her. “Until she stands trial for her crimes.”

Noticing that his pleas and protests were going to get him nowhere, except into a fruitless argument with his sister, he left his son’s body and waded through the sea of people towards Brienne in the hope of at least providing her some comfort and moral support. But the nearer he went, the more the sight that unfolded before him disturbed him, and his jaw clenched in rage when he caught sight of Ser Meryn Trant’s wily expression. There was a ruthless spring in his step when Cersei had commanded him to arrest Brienne, and an eager enthusiasm to do away with the so-called criminal. Touted to succeed Jaime as the next Lord Commander, and blessed with the privilege of being the
one favoured by the king himself before his untimely demise, he appeared to be only too glad to
dance to Cersei’s tunes, to impress her and prove to her that he would make a better leader of the
supreme forces of the royal guard, his skills far superior to her useless cripple brother. Having dealt
with Tyrion in the worst possible way, the foul beast, who was no knight except for his title, looked
to Brienne with relish, the corners of his mouth twitching in a sinister smirk.

The wench, not to be undone by his attempts to intimidate her, awarded her captor with a glare, and
Jaime couldn’t help, but swell with a sudden burst of pride for the woman whose unmatched courage
he had come to admire and respect more than anything else. Pride and the comforting warmth within
him, however, gave way to disgust and apprehension when he took in the unmistakable look of pure
evil on the cunt’s face. It was something he couldn’t ignore or easily overlook, the prospect of what
was to befall her, chilling him despite the sweat that dripped down his forehead. Trant’s lecherous
expression and the glint of lust in his eyes reminded him of Tyrion’s furious outburst about the man.
If he could lay his filthy hands on Sansa’s honour at the behest of the king in plain view of the full
attendance of the royal court, the level of atrocities he would subject the wench to within the confines
of the dank dungeons was unimaginable. She was a tough nut to crack, of far higher strength and
resolve than many men Jaime had known, but even she had her limitations, a breaking point. The
physical scars Locke’s men had inflicted upon her were one thing, but the impression such tortures
had left on her mind was not easy to erase.

And this time again, she’d suffer the same at the hands of the men who called themselves knights.
They’d chain her to the posts and rape her in the darkness and solitude of the innermost depths of the
castle. They’d batter her body and tear apart her mind. And then they’d leave her languishing until
Cersei decided to do her the kindness of executing her and putting an end to her agony.

This can’t be happening, he lamented, they can’t do this to her. He had no courage to face her, but
avoid her gaze, he couldn’t, either. The blue eyes were sad and flooded with hurt, piercing his heart
and melting his soul, but all he could do was regret his helplessness, nothing to alleviate her pain,
nothing to put an end to this shit show.

“Stop it,” he kept shouting, as he advanced inch by inch, his voice hoarse in an attempt to make
himself heard in the chaos and noise. “Don’t touch her, you bloody cunts,” he screamed when three
of the men who had once answered to him now took pleasure in mishandling an innocent woman.
She resisted, but they persisted, and with one eye on her and the other on the crowd that seemed
determined to hold him back, Jaime attempted to get to her as soon as he could. She tried to fend
them off, but they were no match for her, too many for her to handle. Stay still, wench, he thought,
hoping for one wild second that she could hear his thoughts. What effect would her protests have?
Except, perhaps, invite more of her captors’ wrath, the result of which would be an extra few
minutes of torture when they had her in solitary confinement. They began patting her down,
scanning her body for hidden weapons, their lousy fingers lingering more than necessary on her
chest and her thighs, groping and feeling her, and all Jaime could do was ball his fingers into an
angry fist, silently wishing he had the opportunity to run his blade through each of them and slice
them into half from balls to brain.

Trant tried to shove a hand under her dress, and she shrank away in disgust, only to be restrained in
place by the other two. This was the last straw for Jaime, and he could take it no more. His
intervention might be foolhardiness, stupidity, even, but how could he watch while his wife was
being humiliated like this? “You’re not getting away with that,” he muttered to himself, gritting his
teeth as he pulled out his sword. Ready to fling himself on them in an impulse, he charged ahead,
when there came a welcome interruption in the guise of his father who had appeared beside Brienne
from amidst the hundreds who had gathered to watch this spectacle.
“Stop this nonsense at once,” bellowed Tywin, the authoritative note in his voice sufficient to silence the mob which was threatening to go berserk.

When Meryn Trant stood where he was, his hand still clutching Brienne’s arm, Tywin ordered him again, “Ser Meryn, did you not hear me? You will get away from her immediately.”

“You grace—” began Trant, throwing Cersei a displeased glance, visibly unhappy with the prospect of relinquishing custody of his new toy.

“With the king indisposed, and his successor yet to be crowned, I’m in charge,” Tywin reiterated the power of the position he held. “I take the decisions and it is my command you will obey.”

It was with great reluctance that Meryn Trant let go of Brienne, his mates backing off after he did. While they positioned themselves a respectable couple of feet away from her, they still had her enclosed in an intimidating circle.

“You,” said Tywin, pointing to another member of the kingsguard who stood some distance away from this drama. The man came forward, waiting for further instructions from Tywin. “Escort Lady Brienne to her chambers,” he told the knight, before going on to add, “with respect. She’s the lady of the house, do not forget that.” Then he went on, turning to Meryn Trant and his company, his eyes shooting daggers at them. “No harm is to come to her, and mark my words for this is no empty threat, if even a single hair on her head is harmed—” his father articulated every word to make sure his intent was clear, his gaze shifting to Cersei now, wordlessly telling her that he was in charge “—I’m going to ensure the heads responsible for this roll.”

Relieved, and for the first time, thankful for something his father had done, Jaime took this opportunity to observe Cersei. Her tears had dried up, with grief now giving way to rage. The muscles on her pale face twitched, and she looked as if she might reduce Brienne to ashes. But she knew better than to challenge Tywin’s authority, for daring to stand up against their father was something none of his children would ever do, barring only Tyrion, perhaps.

Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment and indignation, Brienne straightened her clothes once she’d recovered from the shock the unexpected attack had flung her into. Merely a few feet away from her now, her distress made him want to rush to her and pull her into a comforting embrace, onlookers and his sister be damned. But before he could act on his impulse, she walked away with her escort without sparing him a look, her indifference churning up a new wave of turmoil within him, uncomfortable possibilities striking him one after the other. Had she lost faith in him? Was this the end of her trust in him? Had his incompetence to protect her reverted him to an oathbreaker in her eyes? He wanted to drag her out of the crowd and usher her to the safe confines of their chambers, away from the crowd and out of the sight of his sister or father or anyone else. He wanted to take her to some place where there would be no one but just the two of them. Nothing but a heart-to-heart conversation with her would bring peace to him, a reassurance to her that he had not let her down, that he still had her best interests at heart.

Intending to do exactly that, he sprang ahead to catch up with her, when his father called out to him with a terse, “Ser Jaime, a word please,” and then disappeared into the crowd, presumably to seek the privacy of his tower.

Torn between his father and his wife for a moment, Jaime realized he had no choice but to obey his father, because had it not been for Tywin’s intervention, Brienne might have suffered the same horrible fate Sansa once had. He didn’t leave, though, without one last look in her direction, and before she could vanish out of his sight, she turned around, this time, meeting his eyes. A subtle nod was the only comfort he could give her now, a quiet promise that he would soon be by her side, a word she could rely on, a promise he wouldn’t go back on.
Pushing aside the harrowing incident for the time being, he followed Tywin to the tower of the hand, wondering what his father would demand in return for the favour he’d done him.

“Thank you,” he said, the second they were indoors, sincerely grateful to his father for sparing Brienne an almost guaranteed humiliation, “for believing she’s innocent.”

“How do you assume she had no hand in this?” his father demanded, his emotionless face and his stern tone conveying that he hadn’t summoned him for empty talk.

“I know her,” Jaime jumped to her defence, perturbed that his father shared Cersei’s opinion. “She could never have--”

“Have you bothered to notice that Sansa Stark is missing?” Tywin pointed out, his icy glare stabbing him.

Jaime blanched, only now realizing that he had paid no attention to anyone, but Brienne, everyone and everything else slipping away from his mind and ceasing to exist. “I didn’t--”

“I could see that,” scolded his father. “You were too full of your wife to observe anything else.” Shifting his gaze to his surroundings, he paced the room, the silence his pauses resulted in too painful for Jaime to bear. “For all I know, your wife could’ve orchestrated the murder with Tyrion--”

“--Tyrion didn’t do it,” Jaime intervened, desperate to get his family out of this false notion, “nor did Brienne assist him. They’re both innocent--”

“Who, more than Sansa Stark, would want revenge on Joffrey?” Tywin continued to project his thoughts with no regard for Jaime’s opinion. “From her perspective, for all the wrongs he’d done her, he deserved the fate he met. Who better to assist her than the husband who worshipped the ground she walked on, and the warrior who had thrown herself at her mother’s feet, and after her death, craved for nothing more than the daughter to become her liege-lady?”

Every word his father spoke made absolute sense, but Jaime’s heart simply refused to believe, though Tywin relentlessly ploughed on, “Lady Brienne ended up becoming a convenient addition to the family, one who could help Sansa from inside--”

“Brienne didn’t do it,” Jaime continued to insist, dread creeping into every corner of his chest. “I can vouch for her.”

Silence prevailed for a while after which Tywin spoke again, “You do care deeply for her.” It was a statement, not a question, and Jaime waited with bated breath for more. “Very well, I’m willing to give her the benefit of the doubt.”

Jaime nodded in gratitude, and was about to leave, when Tywin stopped him, indicating he wasn’t done yet. “Your wife’s still a suspect,” he said, smothering the little wave of hope that had risen inside him, “in the eyes of the numerous who witnessed the unfortunate turn of events, and in Cersei’s eyes. While she won’t be under arrest, I’m predisposed to keep her under observation until her name is cleared--”

“Are you expecting her to stand trial for something she had no connection with?” asked Jaime, dumbfounded.

“Not if she cooperates,” Tywin assured him.

Cooperate had quite a sinister ring to it, but Jaime preferred to remain silent until he’d heard all the terms of the deal, for a deal it had to be, since it involved his father.
“She will restrict her presence within the Red Keep while I have the necessary inquiries done,” Tywin announced his condition. “She is not to leave the castle without my consent, and even if she’s compelled to, for some reason, she is to be escorted by the Kingsguard--”

“Who? That cunt Meryn Trant?” Jaime spat, unable to control his rage. “Did you not happen to see the way he treats women? Do you now--”

“Calm down,” Tywin pacified him, “it won’t be him.” Jaime was slightly mollified, but he still fumed at the idea of subjecting the wench to a subtle imprisonment. “But by no means can your lady be unescorted, except within the four walls of your chambers. At all times, there will be two men stationed outside your door in constant vigil--”

“I can’t allow that,” Jaime objected, knowing for sure, how adversely Brienne would react to this indirect incarceration.

“If you don’t comply, I’m afraid I can do nothing to help you,” Tywin coolly told him, landing him in yet another sticky dilemma. “Ask your wife to abide by my rules--”

“I can’t have her undergo the torment of a trial,” Jaime said, making his stand clear, “promise me--”

Tywin narrowed his brows in suspicion. “You say she’s innocent. Why, then, do you worry about the outcome of this accusation? Even if there is a trial, why should it bother you?”

His recurring nightmare loomed large in his head, bringing along with it, ominous visions of Brienne’s severed head. “Because Cersei will spare no effort to make sure Brienne is put to death.”

“It is with great difficulty that I’ve managed to get you married, Jaime, so there’s no reason I’d want your wife to suffer, or worse still, pay with her life.” Tywin placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “I want you to be happy, son, so leave all your concerns about Cersei to me. If your wife is, as you claim, innocent, I assure you, she’ll emerge from this unscathed.”

“I could take her to Casterly Rock,” Jaime suggested, hoping he could seize an opportunity to get Brienne out of danger. Under the pretext of taking her to his ancestral home, he could attempt a detour and help her escape. A wild idea, that was, no doubt, and that would mean leaving Tyrion alone in the midst of hungry lions for a while, but he could definitely return to help his brother once Brienne was safely out of Cersei’s reach, and on her quest to find Sansa.

“Now isn’t the right time, I’m afraid,” Tyrion shot down his idea. “If you suddenly abscond with your wife, it would fuel further doubts and suspicions against her. Far from helping her prove her innocence, it could ruin her chances of acquittal.”

Jaime had no further questions, nor retorts to make, his only option being to concede to his father’s demands as usual. “I’ll talk to Brienne,” he reluctantly agreed.

“Good,” boomed Tywin. “As long as I’m alive, Cersei won’t lay a finger on your wife,” he said, his tone uncharacteristically soft and soothing. “That’s a promise, son.”

That’s the only ray of sunshine in this whole fucking deal you’ve coerced me into signing, Jaime wryly noted as he made his way to his chambers. Lost in his world and preoccupied with his thoughts, he barely noticed where he was going or what was in front of him, knowing he wasn’t alone in the deserted passages only after he’d bumped headlong into a figure heading in the opposite direction.

“Ser Jaime,” greeted Loras Tyrell with a slight tilt of his head in a half-bow, the corners of his mouth curving in a mocking smile as he regarded Jaime.
“Ser Loras,” Jaime returned the courtesy, having no wish at all, to engage in a conversation with the knight of flowers.

But the young man seemed to have other ideas. “Quite sad, isn’t it?” he remarked, every word that slipped past his lips, bitten by sarcasm.

“What is?” Jaime asked, pretending he hadn’t understood, whilst forcing himself to stay composed.

“I thought the Lannisters excelled in meting out just punishments,” he taunted. “I was under the false impression that my sister had married into a family that had no tolerance for--”

It was time to put a stop to his meandering statements. “What do you mean?”

“Justice,” said the younger knight, his tone laced with bitterness, the artificial sweetness in it now gone, “for my sister who lost her husband before he even had the chance to bed her. For Renly Baratheon, whose killer freely roams the city under the new identity of Lady Lannister of Casterly Rock.” He paused to savour every word he spoke. “A nice pair you make, though, one kingslayer for another--”

“Brienne neither killed Joffrey, nor Renly,” Jaime cut in, fighting to keep his irritation and budding rage on a tight leash. “She was far too much in love with Renly to even touch a hair on his head. It was a shadow that killed him--”

“A shadow that assumed the form of the ugly wench you now call wife--”

“Careful, ser. If I were you, I’d mind my words, for I wouldn’t wish to invoke the wrath of one of the most powerful houses in the seven kingdoms,” Jaime seethed, his tone full of menace, while his fingers itched to unsheathe his sword. If only he had his hand intact, he could’ve taken down three of his caliber at a time, but all he was reduced to, were clever words and subtle threats. “Your sister belongs to my family now, as does Lady Brienne, and it won’t be long until we’re brothers,” he said, reminding Loras of his impending wedding to Cersei. “So I’d recommend we set aside our differences and try to get along as best as possible.”

An arrogant glare was all he received in return, but the warning appeared to have had its intended effect on the boy, and he stepped aside in a gesture of peace, making room for Jaime to be on his way. But just as he was about to leave, Loras called out again, “A knight as handsome and accomplished as you could’ve secured the hand of any of the best noblewomen in the country, and I’m sure there are many who match you in beauty and culture.” His expression, this time, was one of genuine curiosity. “So what the hell did you see in her?”

Jaime stood to ponder for a second.

Something beyond the comprehension of your biased and narrow mind. Something, your precious Renly was blind to, all his life. Something no one, not you, nor this fucking world that merely judges her by her countenance, will ever understand.

Not bothering to bestow upon him the courtesy of an answer, he strode away, his head full of the question he’d been asked, whilst mentally planning the execution of the next thing he had to do.

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With the arrangements for Joffrey’s funeral having taken up all of his day, it was well past midnight by the time Jaime arrived at his chambers. Gently pushing the door open, he entered, taking one tentative step at a time, wondering if she’d be awake at this hour. There she was, sitting on the bed, massaging her forehead with her fingers, obviously bogged down by the stress she had to endure.
“My lady,” he called out to announce his presence as he approached her, apprehensive of her reaction to his presence.

She straightened at the sound of his voice and dropped her hand at once in an attempt to hide her agitation from him. “Ser Jaime.” She sounded strained, almost as if talking took up a great deal of her inner reserves.

He took his place by her side on the bed, staring at the floor in search of appropriate words to comfort her, for none seem to occur to him. “I’m sorry, Brienne,” he said at last, “I’m ashamed of what they did to you--”

“I wasn’t your fault,” she said evenly, with no trace of accusation in her tone.

*My fault was in marrying you and chaining you to this family. My fault was to believe, that one day, you would be treated as one of us.*

“I could never have imagined that the men who once were my comrades behaved worse than savages like Locke,” he told her, forcing himself to look her in the eye. “You didn’t deserve this. No woman deserves such humiliation--”

“I’ve decided to forget it ever happened,” she replied, her tone devoid of emotion this time. “I’m just going to pretend it was another of my nightmares and try to get on with life.”

“I could’ve prevented it,” he said, the pent up anguish and agitation threatening to get out, “I should’ve protected you, I did nothing--”

“There was nothing you could’ve done,” she said, her defence of his ineptitude to strongly oppose his sister frustrating him even more.

“You’re right,” he agreed, exhaling deeply, the true fear within him surfacing once again, as it did from time to time, bringing his nightmares to the fore. “While I did try my best to talk Cersei out of this nonsense, or rather, make a futile attempt to talk at her, had I demonstrated aggression beyond a limit, she would’ve done everything in her power to take it out on you. I still fear she might, though my father has assured me of your safety--”

“--in exchange for my confinement to these chambers for the rest of my life,” she supplied, guessing the rest of it.

“I apologize,” he told her again, for the want of better words to alleviate her suffering, “I didn’t anticipate any of this.”

Her gaze softened and the hardened expression she’d worn all along vanished, easing her features back to normal. “Stop apologizing for something that was beyond your control,” she rebuked him, her tone, thankfully, returning to its usual.

“Thank you,” he murmured, the sincerity of her words overwhelming him. Tempted, though he was, to reach out and hold her hand, he lacked the courage to get closer to her than necessary.

“For what?”

“For continuing to place your trust in me, despite everything that you’ve been through. For believing that there is still some level of decency left in me,” he said, pausing just enough to breathe, “though, I may not deserve your faith anymore--”

“I trust you more than anyone else, Ser Jaime,” she firmly reiterated what she’d told him countless
times in the past, her eyes confirming her faith in him, “I always will.”

*I hope I live up to it.*

In a flash, the path ahead, and his role in it became absolutely clear to him.

“You don’t have to bear with my family for much longer,” he said, dropping his voice to a whisper so that the men outside wouldn’t hear a word. “Give me a week, my lady, and I assure you I’ll make the necessary arrangements for you to get out of here.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief, the lines on her forehead creasing into a frown. “Are you suggesting that I run away from King’s Landing?”

“Yes,” he went on in the same low tone, convinced that this was the right thing to do. “I’ll smuggle you out of here, and you’ll be free to set out in search of Sansa.”

But as he had expected, she promptly shook his head in refusal. “That’s insane. It could get you into trouble.”

“That’s the only way out,” he persuaded her, frustrated with the effort he had to put in to drill his idea into her stubborn head. “Sansa’s somewhere in the open with Cersei’s predators out to tear her apart. Who else can save her, if not for you—”

“I never knew you cared this much about Sansa.”

“I don’t,” he admitted, “but I care about your— our vow to her mother. And by no means do I want you to fail her.”

Brienne still looked unconvinced. “With these men guarding me day and night, sneaking out doesn’t seem to be a viable option.”

“Leave that to me. I’ll do whatever it takes to make it possible,” he asserted, determined to free her from this hell. “You won’t be a caged bird for long, wench, I promise.”

She considered him for a moment, the emotions in her eyes, unfathomable. After a long spell of restless silence, she finally nodded in consent to his plan.

Heaving a sigh of relief, he was about to get up to change and retire to bed, when she addressed this time, clearly meaning to say something. “Ser Jaime?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m sorry about your brother. I’m sure he didn’t do it,” she mouthed, her eyes brimming with concern. “Will he make it?”

Jaime shook his head in despair. “He’ll stand trial, and that’s not good. Not while my father and sister bribe or threaten every witness to testify against him.” He sighed deeply, another pang of helplessness leaving him feeling utterly useless and worthless. “They despise him.”

“Have you been to see him?”

He hung his head. “What do I say to him?”

Despite her dire situation, her tone was encouraging, as was the hand she placed on his. “Tell him you believe in his innocence.”
“I knew you’d trust me,” Tyrion gushed, wringing his hand in gratitude. “Who else have I got, but you, Jaime?”

“Did she do it?” asked Jaime, bringing forth the doubt that had been nagging him all through the night. “Your wife--”

“--is innocent,” snapped his brother. “At least I, for one, believe she isn’t the killer.” He waddled around the shit covered floor, his sharp eyes throwing random glances at his surroundings in restlessness. “She couldn’t have done it.”

“She had every reason to.”

“No.” His brother maintained a firm stance. “I trust my wife as much as you trust yours.”

Jaime sighed at the mention of his wife, painfully reminded of his promise to her. Of the week he’d asked of her, one day had passed, with only six more left for him to enjoy her company. Then she’d be gone, forever and out of his life, never to see him again, never to set foot in his path.

“You look troubled,” Tyrion rightly observed, jolting him out of his musings. “Has father revoked his promise to keep Brienne out of this?”

“No.”

“What is it, then?” Tyrion prodded him, his keen eyes delving deep into his in scrutiny.

“I promised to get her out of here,” Jaime confessed, dropping his voice to lower than a whisper, “and I have absolutely no idea of how to get on with it.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Tyrion interjected, expressing his displeasure and disapproval of the idea. “For the first time in your life something good has been happening, and you want to put an abrupt end to it?”

“Forcing her into days of confinement and constant vigilance would bear no benefit for anyone,” Jaime argued. “She has a life of her own, a future to build, and staying here as a pet to the Lannisters will only be detrimental to her personal progress.”

“You speak only about the present,” persisted his brother. “It’s just a matter of days, you can leave for Casterly Rock as soon as she’s been acquitted--”

Jaime narrowed his brows in doubt. “Do you think Cersei’s going to let that happen?”

“Father’s on your side,” Tyrion continued to insist. “I don’t see how Cersei’s going to prevail when all he wants is this marriage to succeed.”

“Father might be supportive today,” Jaime reluctantly agreed, “but rest assured, it’s family that eventually matters to him above everything else. If Cersei happens to manipulate evidence to showcase Brienne in a bad light, father would be forced to side with our sister.” The uncomfortable certainty of such a thing happening increased his uneasiness, goading him into jumping towards quick action. “This isn’t going to end well, not unless I choose to take matters in my hand.”

Tyrion stopped pacing and considered his words. “I see your point,” he conceded in agreement, sitting down by the post he was chained to. He slipped into a few seconds of deep consideration, after which his face lit up in enlightenment. “Bronn could help,” he suggested, and at that very
moment the cell door creaked open.

They fell silent immediately, wondering who the visitor might be, and in came Tyrion’s sellsword friend.

“Ah, Bronn,” Tyrion welcomed him with a huge grin, “join us. We were just talking about you.”

Bronn swaggered in their direction and took a seat on the floor beside Tyrion, his eyes darting from one brother to the other, seeking further explanation.

“My brother needs your help,” said Tyrion, and went on to elaborate the conversation they’d just had. “Can you do something to get her past the white cloaks and the castle guards?” he asked, once he’d related the entire story.

Bronn scratched his beard, pondering their request. “It depends,” was his cryptic response after a while.

“On?” Jaime asked.

Tyrion simply waved him away. “You’ll get the gold you want,” he assured Bronn. “My brother is known to pay well.”

“Very well then,” Bronn agreed. “I’ll think of something.” He turned to Jaime. “Your wife will be safely out of the city before you even know it.”

Jaime managed a smile, unsure whether to be relieved or miserable about the prospect of bidding the wench goodbye.

*****

“Make sure you’re packed by dusk,” Jaime reminded her before leaving. “Podrick Payne, Tyrion’s squire will accompany you, and you will both be aided in your escape by Bronn’s men dressed as gold cloaks.”

Brienne absentmindedly nodded, unsure whether to be happy or miserable with the idea of abandoning him to the dark fate that lay in store for him. While she had consented to his reckless idea of an escape, every single day she’d been tormented by second thoughts, her conscience urging her to push this ridiculous plan under the rug and stand by her husband.

“I—” he began, on the brink of saying something, but faltered. “I’ll see you in the evening,” he said after a long pause. “Be ready by then.” Without waiting for a response, he turned away and left.

I’m never going to see him again. The blunt truth hit her like a stone to the head, knocking her incapable of thinking or acting coherently.

A lot had transpired over the last six days. Tyrion had lost his case, all evidence pointing fingers at him, leaving him with no choice but to demand trial by combat, a foolish move, in Jaime’s opinion, for no one would be insane enough to pit their strengths against the Mountain, who would be Cersei’s obvious choice for a champion.
Worried to death about his brother’s doomed future, Jaime had barely slept the last few nights, and even on the rare occasions he’d managed to catch some sleep, he’d been tormented by nightmares akin to the one that had harressed him the night they’d spent at the inn. Abruptly awakened during the nights, he’d sit up, sweating and gasping, and Brienne would stay awake along with him, holding him close to her chest, whilst whispering tender words of comfort in his ear. Eventually, however, they’d drift away, clinging to each other.

It wasn’t just the nights that troubled him, for most of his waking time, he spent brooding about Tyrion’s plight and Brienne’s safely, often voicing his fears that Cersei might target her next, stopping at nothing to destroy her.

_He’s been reduced to a wreck, and I’m going to be cruel enough to leave him to his fate, alone with his cares with no one to comfort him._

But that was what he wanted, Sansa’s life and the fulfilment of the promise they had made to Lady Catelyn.

_More than his welfare…_

Her chest heavy with a weight she couldn’t offload, she got up to follow his instructions and make arrangements for her travel, reluctance and the urge to stay back making every attempt to stop her. No sooner had she pulled out a few clothes from her shelf, than there was a knock on the door.

When she opened the door, Cersei’s handmaiden stood there, a sign that couldn’t bode well for Brienne. “Her grace wishes to see you, m’lady.”

Having no choice but to comply with her demands, Brienne followed the girl to Cersei’s chambers, thinking all along, what new threats her sister-in-law had in store for her.

“Your grace,” she wished her with a bow, and the maid left the room, leaving the two women alone to talk.

“The lady of House Lannister,” Cersei remarked in condescension, a sour expression tainting her delicate features as she regarded Brienne, “struggling with a curtsy.”

Brienne chose not to answer, giving her a polite questioning look instead, waiting for her to state the purpose of this unplanned meeting.

“You might wonder,” Cersei started to speak, a smirk beginning to play at the corners of her lips, “how could I have possibly known about your little nightly adventure with my brother?” Though puzzled, Brienne continued to maintain a dignified silence. “That maid of yours is one of my little birds,” she revealed, taking in Brienne’s shock-ridden eyes with satisfaction. “Ever since you’ve set foot here, she’s been monitoring every move of yours, tailing you whenever you’ve left the castle, including that night—” she paused, and her eyes shone with malice. “With my brother missing at the same time, it wasn’t too difficult to put things together. All that was required was someone in disguise to follow you. It was as simple as that. All I had to do was set off a spark, and the rumours began to take shape, spreading within no time like wildfire.”

Brienne had to fight hard to prevent her eyes from surrendering to the turmoil within her. So Cersei was the one responsible for the disgrace she’d been through.

“All I wanted was to get you away from my brother, and the foul stories I’d spread could’ve done the trick. Little did I know that my plan would backfire on me,” she barked, her eyes burning with contempt. “How could I have known you’d end up with my father’s blessings? How could I have
guessed that you’d have trapped my brother when he was maimed and lonely, and bewitched him into marrying you--"

“Our marriage was the only way out of torture and execution,” Brienne tried to explain. “It was--”

“--nothing but a ploy to charm my brother into falling under your spell,” Cersei snarled, “a means to get close to my son and murder him at the first available chance. Jaime was your captor, and you wanted to avenge the treatment you had suffered at his hands, you wanted revenge for Catelyn Stark’s family, you wanted Sansa Stark’s freedom. You’ve used Jaime for your benefits, Lady Brienne, bending him to do your bidding--”

“I did no such thing!” cried Brienne indignantly, “I hated your brother when we’d first met, but--”

“But?” Cersei prompted, her venomous eyes skimming across hers for the truth.

“I haven’t used him,” Brienne admitted in a hushed tone, “I just--” she stopped, the confusion about what she truly felt for Jaime preventing her from going on.

“What, then?” Cersei demanded, narrowing her eyes. “Have you fallen in love with him?”

Brienne felt the floor beneath her feet shift, her head reeling under the impact of the question.

*That’s absolutely untrue,* she wanted to say, but the words refused to slip past her lips, leaving her stunned by her involuntary hesitation to satisfactorily answer the question. The bluntness of the accusation shocked her, but more than that, she was shaken by the lack of the immediate denial she’d expected from herself. Ever since Harrenhal, she’d shared an inexplicable bond with Jaime, most of it stemming out of respect and regard for one another, but there was something more than that she’d been subconsciously harbouring for him, something she couldn’t put her finger on, something she’d been scared to give a name to.

*Love, it isn’t,* she told herself, *it can’t be.*

“I don’t care if you love him or lust after him,” Cersei went on, throwing her off her thoughts, “because this is just his whim, and you, a toy I never expected him to crave for. You managed to entrap him in a weak moment, but I’m sure he’ll soon tire of you and cast you away. He will never love an ugly wench like you.” She paused to observe the effect her words had on Brienne. “No matter where he wanders off to, Jaime will always come back to me in the end,” she declared with smug confidence. “If you expect him to honour the fake vows he’d made to you, or warm your bed forever, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“I expect no such thing from him,” Brienne answered, knowing full well that this was, by far, the harshest truth she would have to come to terms with.

“This so-called relationship you call a marriage isn’t going to last for long,” she continued to sting Brienne with the choicest venomous words she could come up with. “Irrespective of what my father wishes from you and Jaime, you will never live a life with him, neither here, nor at Casterly Rock.”

“I propose to abide by your father’s commands,” said Brienne, choosing to settle for a diplomatic reply.

Cersei ground her teeth in anger. “You will never have Jaime, is that understood?”

Having put up with enough of her threats, Brienne was overcome by a wave of suffocation and the need to leave the room. “I’ll bear that in mind, your grace,” she replied with a forced calm in her voice. “If that is all--"
“You may leave now,” Cersei curtly dismissed her, “and remember my words.”

“You grace.”

With a short bow, Brienne sped away from there, rushing to her room as fast as she could, Cersei’s assumption of her feelings hitting her harder than the threats she’d made her.

*No matter what I feel, it doesn’t matter,* she thought, the words coming back to her over and over again, *he’ll never love an ugly wench like me.*

The rest of the day went by in a trace, but Brienne wasted most of it, her heart not quite in her preparations to leave. By sun-down, Jaime returned to their chambers, only to find that her clothes and other possessions lay strewn about, unpacked and in a mess.

“Why aren’t you packed yet?” he asked when his eyes fell on a heap of clothes on the bed. “There’s not much time left--”

“I’m not leaving,” she told him, fighting to keep her voice from shivering. Cersei might have tried her best to unnerve her, but Jaime was her husband, and despite love never being a factor in their relationship, she couldn’t just abandon him for her own selfish reasons.

*He may never love me, but I’m not going to leave him to a fate worse than shit. Not tonight, not like this, not to face his father’s wrath for no fault of his.*

Jaime, however, looked exasperated and in complete disagreement with her. “Every day you spend here is a day farther away from Sansa, and your vow--”

Her determination only strengthened by the second. “I know, but I’m not walking out like this.”

Frowning, he perched next to her on the bed, his eyes arresting hers in an intense gaze. “Why?”

“If I leave now, you’ll be charged with disobeying your father’s orders,” she pointed out, incase he’d overlooked the obvious.

A heavy sigh followed, after which, he replied, “Yes.”

“It could mean treason for letting a murder suspect escape,” she said, drawing him into the possible consequences of their recklessness.

“It could,” he agreed, his voice thickening.

“It could put you under trial,” she continued, dreading the outcome of such a possibility, “and I can’t-”

“Don’t worry about me,” he tried to reassure her, his voice alternating between steady and unstable. “Nothing’s more important than your freedom and your promise to--”

“What about the other promise I made?” she asked, the lump in her throat hindering her speech. “My promise to you,” she explained in response to his vacant expression.

“I don’t understand, Brienne.”

“We both swore an oath, remember?” she said, taking him back to the day of their wedding. “To stand by each other until the end of our days.”

Warmth flooded his eyes, and his expression mellowed, but he continued to find reasons to push her
away, “We have to part ways some day.”

“Yes, but today isn’t that day,” she stubbornly asserted. “I can’t leave you at the mercy of your father and sister.”

“You’re impossible,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief, “What do you expect me to do? Take you to Casterly Rock? And what would become of you after that? How do you plan to get away—?”

“All in good time,” she placated him. “Maybe we ought to go to Casterly Rock and lie low for a while if that’s the only way out.”

“And then what?” he demanded, refusing to see the logic in her suggestion. “Do you think my father will let you go?”

“Let a few days pass and you can appeal for an annulment on the grounds that I’m infertile,” she repeated her earlier suggestion. “If I can’t bear your heirs, I’m sure your father would only be too keen to find you another wife.”

“This is ridiculous,” he said, persistent with his refusal.

“It may be—”

“What about Sansa? Isn’t her life important to you?”

This time, she hesitated before voicing her thoughts, heat spreading up her neck and to her cheeks. “It is, but so is yours, Ser Jaime,” she declared with an air of finality. “And I’m going nowhere tonight. I’m not someone who trades one life for another.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but quietened down, ceasing to argue after that. He stared at her for a good many seconds, his eyes bound to hers as if they belonged together. “You’re as stubborn as a mule,” he remarked after a while. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“You have,” she said, breaking into a smile for the first time in days, “many times.”

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The week dragged on, bringing with it the misfortune of Oberyn Martell’s death. The Dornish prince who had volunteered to be Tyrion’s champion, had met an unfortunate defeat at the hands of the Mountain, his downfall sealing Tyrion’s fate, his sentence now, just a matter of official announcement. This horrifying turn of events had taken a heavy toll on Jaime, and he was barely eating or sleeping or even sparing a few minutes to talk to Brienne. Mostly confined to himself, with solitude his new constant companion, he spent most of his time brooding and staring into nothingness.

“Can we do nothing at all to help?” Brienne asked him one evening, unable to watch his deterioration.

“He is to be executed tomorrow morning,” Jaime said, his voice hoarse and sore, “it’s too late, Brienne, I’ve failed my brother.”

She let her hand slide over his in a comforting grasp. “I’m sorry, Ser Jaime.”

Her touch, perhaps the last straw for him, he pulled her into an embrace, burrowing his face in her shoulder. Her arms went around him, her fingers gently ruffling his luscious mane, and she held him, while he lay still, panting against her, his warm breath and the achingly familiar weight of his body
shooting out unspeakable signals to the depths of her core. Tightening his grip around her, he nuzzled her neck, his beard rubbing into her skin, his closeness reviving the wildest of her fantasies and the countless unmentionable dreams she’d dreamt of him.

“I wish we could do something to help him get away,” she breathed, hoping that saying something would keep her mounting physical distress at bay.

Her innocent words had quite an unexpected effect, for Jaime let go of her, looking at her with a newfound sparkle in his eyes. “I can, actually.” He sprang out of bed immediately and dashed to the door. “I’ll see you in a while, wench.”

*I hope you do nothing stupid or impulsive.*

With that thought in mind, she retired to bed, praying to the seven to award success to her husband in whatever he had ventured out to do. A few minutes of gazing into the darkness helped, and she slowly began to slip out of consciousness, her eyelids getting heavier by the second.

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Tywin Lannister lived no more. Murdered by Tyrion the instant he’d been broken out of the dungeons, Jaime took the blame upon himself for having given his brother an opportunity for revenge.

All through the funeral at the Sept of Baelor, Brienne was the centre of Cersei’s attention, her punishing eyes penetrating her like a dagger to the heart. Jaime’s twin, she might be, but far from similar, the two were, the icy wrath in Cersei’s gaze a stark contrast to the warmth Jaime’s eyes exuded.

When they returned to the castle after the ceremony, Jaime left abruptly, citing some important court matters, while Brienne busied herself with her daily routine, preparing for her morning meeting with Lady Olenna at the gardens.

Lunch time came and went, and there was no sign of Jaime, nor did she see him during tea. When dusk came with still no whiff of him, she began to get slightly apprehensive, worried if all was well with him. Just when she was about to dress and set out in search of him, the door burst open, and in he came, looking harrowed and white as a sheet.

“What happened? Is everything—all right, she meant to ask, but he gave her no chance to speak.

“Pack your things,” he commanded, striding over to her.

Tired of re-entering the same discussion again, she wearily reminded him, “I told you I’m going nowhere—”

“We,” he corrected her, rushing to gather his clothes and a few other essentials. “We are leaving King’s Landing by midnight.”

She asked again, wondering if she’d heard him right, “We?”

“You, me and Podrick.”

“But why do we have to flee?” she asked, still unable to gather the urgency of the situation.

“I’ll explain later,” he whispered, a sense of desperation clouding his features. “There’s no time. Just hurry—”
“You have a responsibility as the head of your house, you can’t just walk away from here,” she pointed out, realizing what this would mean for his future. “If it’s my life you’re worried about, I can take care of myself, I can--”

“I can’t leave you to face your fate alone,” he said, his tone dripping with anguish. He paused his preparations to talk to her. “We both swore an oath, remember?” It was his turn to refresh her memory this time. “To stand by each other until the end of our days.”

“But you--”

“I made a promise, Brienne.” He took a step closer to her, and his tone softened as he reached for her hand. “And I intend to keep that promise.”

Chapter End Notes

01-Oct-2019 : The next chapter's coming up after JB week. Apologies for the delay :( 
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

As they embark on a journey to an unexpected destination, Brienne slips into an emotional journey of her own.

Chapter Notes

Not much action in this chapter because this is more of Brienne's introspection, her emotional ups and downs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her hand in his, she was lost in his kind eyes, his words ringing in her head long after he’d spoken.

I made a promise...

His determination to get her out of this mess set Brienne’s mind racing and her pulse soaring to the skies. When was the last time anyone had done something for her? Vows, she’d been committing to all her life, some to people she’d barely known but grown to care about, making promises, giving her word to keep them safe and trying her best to keep it, but none of them had ever spared even the slightest thought for her.

Whether she lived or perished had never yet been the cause of anybody’s concern. Not until recently.

Until her husband had begun showing interest in her wellbeing. The man who’d once tortured her and nearly thrown away his life to cut her down had volunteered to put himself in a precarious position to protect her. He had rebelled against his father and bargained with him for her safety. He’d antagonised his sister and incurred her wrath, all for the sake of a woman he’d known for mere months. Once her fiercest adversary, he’d now managed to breach the barriers she’d erected around her, he’d torn down the impregnable iron curtains that protected her vulnerabilities, and day by day, with every single arrival and departure of the sun, her fondness for him grew, and along with it her admiration, her--

Blinking away her thoughts, she dragged herself back to the problem in hand, snapping the dangerous thread that had grown far too long. She tried to step away from him, but couldn’t, she wanted to find him a fitting response, but not an inch of her cooperated, her breath trapped somewhere in her chest and her feet stuck to the ground. Her hand still in his custody, she stood muted, chained to his eyes for long after he’d announced his decision. He gave her a soft smile and her fingers a friendly squeeze, and lightning struck her again, merciless, knocking the wind out of her like every other time he’d touched her, awakening and alerting every nerve in her body, reminding her that she was, after all, a woman who yearned for the affection of a man.

A few seconds of failure later, she gave in and gave up, drowning in him, drinking in his handsome face, the lines of concern on his forehead and the shadow of worry in his emerald eyes urging her to drop a few words of solace in his ear. The creases at the corners of his eyes tugged at her
heartstrings, tempting her to run her fingers through his hair in reassurance. Never before had she felt like this about anyone. Not this much compassion, not such profound affinity, never such fondness and definitely not this much lo--

*It’s no more than a likeness to his fate,* her brain jumped to her rescue, shoving logic into her face to bury away the concerning revelations that were threatening to surface. *We’ve both been shunned by the world, treated as outcasts,* she reasoned with herself, *and that explains this odd bond we share.*

True, that was, for he’d been through a lot over the last few days, lost some of his family, battled his differences with others, and if her life had taken the path Tywin Lannister had attempted to force upon them, she’d have soothed him with a comforting hug, and a kiss, maybe, and probably even more--

What, in the Seven Hells, am I thinking?

When it struck her that she’d been blushing all along, she cut off the unnecessary stream of thoughts, hoping Jaime wouldn’t have noticed the way her body reacted to him. Tywin Lannister lived no more, and with him, had come to an end the pact Jaime had made to lead a life of matrimony with her. He wasn’t bound to her any longer. Liberated from this undesirable bond, he was free to pursue the life he desired, to be reunited, some day, with the love that had occupied and dominated his heart for decades.

*He’s ready to run away with me, to hide me in a safe corner,* pointed out a little voice inside her, *for he values this bond, this inexplicable something he shares with me.*

*He’s merely being compassionate with me,* her contradicting self promptly countered, *upholding a promise he made because that’s what a true knight would do.* A knight, he’d been thinking as, not a husband. Not a lover. A lover, he could never be, not to anyone but his sister, and despite his differences with her, he could never fall out of love for her.

He can never fall in love with another.

*And certainly not with a creature like me,* she decided on his behalf, and it was better that way, for love and marriage were complications she’d rather steer clear of.

*Besides, I can never fall in love again,* she stubbornly brushed aside Cersei’s accusation, *not after Renly. There can be no one else.*

Keen to put some distance between them, she jerked away her hand with more force than she’d intended to expend, leaving Jaime with a cloud of doubt in his eyes.

“Is--did I do anything wrong?” he asked, anxious, perhaps, that he had toed an invisible line.

“Let’s--um--” she stuttered, seeking out her best stoic expression to mask her emotions and vulnerability. “I’d better start getting my stuff packed,” she said, glad that her voice and her madly fluttering heart had returned to normal.

He studied her for a moment, then nodded in agreement. “So should I. I’ve asked Podrick to be ready by midnight.”

Relieved to find something to do to keep her thoughts at bay, she approached her shelf and pulled out a trunk, halting when he made a surprised noise. “We can’t carry this much luggage, wench, it’d slow us down. Just the bare essentials,” he instructed, before going on to include, “and your sword.”

Stowing the trunk away, she got out the saddlebag she’d brought from Riverrun. A few sets of small-
clothes, a couple of pairs of breeches and tunics, and she was ready to step outside, into a new world, the pleasantries, or probably horrors of the unknown awaiting her. A new challenge welcomed her, the quest to locate Sansa driving her nerves into a state of overwork, a surge of excitement rising in her despite the ominous threat to her life and Cersei’s shadow still over her head.

“Is there any word of Sansa?” she inquired, eager to find and protect the helpless girl. “Where are we going to begin our search?”

When he answered her, he averted her eyes and began making an elaborate show of shoving a bundle of clumsily folded clothes into another bag. “Sansa can wait for the time being. My priority is to get you someplace safe first, so far away that Cersei can’t get her bloody assassins--”

“No,” Brienne interrupted, the further consequences of putting off what she was supposed to have done long back hitting her with a flash of dread. “I swore a vow to keep Sansa safe. I’ve lost enough time, I can’t waste--”

“What good are you to Sansa, dead?” His weary expression told her that he wasn’t in the mood for counter-opinions. “You can only keep her safe if you’re alive and standing, wench.” He lowered his tone to an agitated whisper. “Why don’t you put aside your argumentative trait for a change--”

“--I’m not arguing,” she hissed, equally affected, “I’m only--”

“--going to do as I say,” he commanded, the finality with which he spoke, telling her that there was no room for negotiation.

She slumped to the bed in silent frustration, and when she’d calmed down, she began probing him about this mysterious journey. “Where do you propose we flee to?”

A deep sigh greeted her question. “Tarth.”

Wondering if she’d heard him right, she sprang to her feet, infuriated. “You’re not taking me home, I can’t just--”

“That’s the safest for you now,” he explained, putting aside his bag that was now bursting at the seams. “There’s word that Sansa has been spotted travelling towards the Vale, to seek refuge with her aunt, perhaps--”

“Then that’s where I should be going,” Brienne jumped, excited with the positivity that Sansa was still hale and hearty.

Jaime shook his head. “That’s where Cersei would expect you to go,” he said, with an impatient click of his tongue. “Casterly Rock was an option, but that’s predictable, an obvious refuge. Tarth is the last place she’ll bother to send her men to. We lie low at your father’s for a while, and when she’s off your scent, you can set out on your quest.”

You, it was, she noted, not us.

And obviously so. Of course, she had to be on her own some day. Their paths were meant to cross, but only for a while. A lifetime with each other was something neither of them wished for, neither of them were made for.

“Very well,” she conceded, unwilling to think of the day she’d have to eventually part with him for good, “we’ll do as you suggest,” then returned to her perch on the bed.

“When you leave Tarth, Podrick will accompany you,” he uncovered the rest of his plan. “You can
train him to be your squire--"

“I can manage on my own. I don’t need a squire,” she shot back, the prospect of parting ways with Jaime affecting her more than she’d expected it to. “I’m no knight.”

“Not today,” he corrected her, traces of a smile ghosting his lips, “but a day might come when you could be one.”

Brienne rolled her eyes in disbelief and displeasure. The Jaime Lannister of old, the one who belittled her and pelted petty boyish insults at her was long gone, transformed into a man she respected, but some things could never change, one of it, probably, being was his ability to jest with her, no matter how hard he fought to bite back this impulse. What else was this, if not a subtle taunt? This, more than the anguish that she could never acquire a Knighthood, stung her. “Women can’t be knights,” she replied in a small voice. “You know that quite well, so do not mock my sex, Ser Jaime, and my unfortunate fate to never be known by the title I’ve craved for since childhood.”

He sat down beside her. “I told you I’d never mock you again, that I’d never toy with your emotions--” he paused to take in a deep breath “--but you’re never going to believe me, are you?” The pain and hurt in his eyes made her want to shut out the world and pull him into a comforting embrace. “Once an asshole, always--”

“Oh, shut up,” she stopped him, ashamed that she’d doubted him, “that wasn’t what I meant. I think you know that’s not what I think about you.”

He shuffled closer, then slaying her with a soul-piercing gaze and a heartwarming smile, he spoke in the softest lilt she’d ever heard, “What, then, do you think of me, Brienne?”

The answer to his question was something she dared not scan her mind for, as she knew not what alarming truths such a search might hurl her way. “Right now,” she hummed, resuming her packing, “I think you’re right. We ought to stay away from your sister.”

The smile was gone, his brows crumpling into a frown. “That’s not an answer to my question, wench.”

“That’s the only answer you’re going to get,” she said, putting him off the usual way. When that had silenced him, she decided to change the subject. “How are we going?”

“The underground tunnel,” he explained, “the route I led Tyrion through. It opens out to the Blackwater Rush. A boat waiting there will take us to Dragonstone, and from there, we’re going to board a ship to Tarth.”

“The dungeon,” Brienne pondered, assessing the risk associated with this wild plan, “but that’s going to be well guarded, your sister--”

“--has deployed all her forces to protect the would-be king and hunt for my brother,” Jaime disclosed. “She’s sent them out far and wide to bring her his head. With the city walls and gates manned to the maximum, the dungeon’s our easiest way out. With Tyrion gone and no other prisoner of value being housed there, Cersei won’t think it important enough to be guarded.”

“It’ll still be fortified with a bare minimum of men at least,” she argued, “how are we to--”

“That’s where Bronn comes in. He’ll get us past any hindrances, any guards that threaten our escape.”

“And you trust him?”
His lips curved in a crooked smile. “With Bronn, trust isn’t necessary, gold is. That’s what gets him going, and I’ve paid him more than enough for the services he’ll render.”

“This boy—” she struggled to recall the name “—Podrick, why—”

“He’s a good lad,” Jaime leaped in defence of the boy she’d barely met, “served my brother well. He deserves to be someplace safe, do something worthwhile with his life. What could be better than entrusting him to your worthy hands? He could take your example and build a life out of—”

“I’m no leader,” she promptly pointed out, “I don’t want people to follow—”

“You might one day be,” he suggested, then made haste to add, “Before you start flinging accusations at me, wench, know that I’m dead serious. I do believe you’ll make an outstanding leader. This is no jest nor a poor attempt to ridicule you.”

His proactive defensive stand and his fierce belief in her capabilities made her smile. “I’ll give the boy a chance.”

“Very good,” he acknowledged, satisfied, “now why don’t we—”

“What will you do?” she surrendered to her niggling curiosity, putting forth the question that had been harassing her for a while. “After I head out to find Sansa, where will you go?”

His chest began to heave in laboured breaths. “I haven’t yet thought of that.”

And what about our marriage, she was tempted to ask, about the vows we recited to one another? Will you return to your sister? she asked, putting her racing thoughts to the words she assumed wouldn’t give away the disturbance within her, a normal question that would give him no clue of the storm brewing inside her.

Yet again, her inquiry was received with a thoughtful sigh. “I’ll drift along wherever my fate leads me to.”

“That’s no answer to my question, Ser Jaime,” she said, flustered by the lack of clarity in his reply. “That’s the only answer you’re going to get, Brienne.”

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She stared out into the darkness, the cool midnight breeze kissing her face as Pod rowed away, the Red Keep left behind, farther and farther as they moved, and with it, Cersei and her threats. The pleasant memories, however, would forever be locked within her, the wonderful moments she’d spent in the castle with Jaime, the countless times she’d knocked him into the dirt during their sparring matches.

How could she ever forget the numerous instances where he’d almost become her husband?

Hiding a smile, she recalled the various times he’d inadvertently touched her, held her hand, and breached her personal space. Her heart leaped to her throat when she recounted the nights she’d spent on his bed, struggling not to blush when she remembered the mornings she’d woken up in his arms. The visions were as clear as the waters of the Sapphire Isle - his lean torso, his well-built shoulders, the enticing patch of hair on his chest--

“Is something bothering you, Brienne?” came his crisp voice in the serenity of the night.
Glad to have been blessed with the canopy of the dark sky, she was relieved that he couldn’t see her blush as hard as the evening sun. “Just—”  
our future, she was about to say, but checked herself “—my future and what might become of Sansa by the time I get to her. I hope she stays alive.”

“I hope so too,” he whispered, the moonlight bouncing off his dark hair as he hung his head. She’d seen his hair in varying states of beauty and ugliness - coated with dirt and filth when she’d first met him, a striking gold when he’d returned to his real self, and now as dark as rain-clouds, it looked just as enticing as ever, for nothing could conceal the charm the man exuded.

On his behest, they’d set out in disguise, dressed as sellswords with soot to discolour their hair. A commoner with a Valyrian steel blade would raise more eyebrows than necessary, so she’d stashed her sword away, carrying it out in stealth.

“Sansa Stark is my last chance at honour,” he went on, “so I hope you—”

“You proved your honour when you put yourself before me,” she gushed in his defence. “You’re the most honourable man I’ve met, Ser Jaime, a knight worthy of his title. Never let that slip away from your mind,” she asserted, ready to challenge anyone who dared to counter her. “Not even for a minute.”

Her little speech was met with silence, but he glanced across the length of the boat to seize her eyes, regarding her with utmost interest, the depth in his keen scrutiny making her squirm uncomfortably. Desperate for a distraction, she ran an absentminded hand through hair, only to pull it out and stare at her blackened fingers in disgust. “Damn!” she cursed, wiping it clean on her breeches.

Jaime chuckled at her discomfort. “You’ll get used to it,” he consoled her. “It’s just a matter of days. Until we get to your shores.” A mischievous glint adorned his eyes, the sparkle in them enhanced in the moonlight when he added, “This guise suits you, my lady.”

Her ears grew warm, every instance he’d commented about her looks coming alive in her memories, every criticism he’d hurled at her returning to punish her. “I get that I’m mannish and everything a lady shouldn’t be, you don’t have to—”

“That wasn’t what I implied, Brienne,” he hurriedly justified, “I’ve told you—”

“I remember what you told me,” she bit back. “I’m much uglier in daylight, aren’t I?” she snarled, throwing his nasty words back at him, his attempt to pacify her failing to extinguish her simmering vexation.

He flung her a look of exasperation that bordered on frustrated helplessness. “Aren’t you ever going to get over that, Brienne?”

She clenched her teeth, frustrated that he’d never be attracted to her. Not when a beauty like Cersei was around to grace his life. “If I could haunt your dreams and snatch your peace of mind in return for everything you’ve said to me, I’d happily do so—”

Pod began to snigger, and she paused, her attention and her fury diverted to him, but when she glared daggers at the boy, he immediately disguised it into a cough with an apologetic, “Pardon me, ser—”

“I’m not a ser,” she barked, directing her rage at the lad.

He looked terrified. “I—I’m sorry, m’lady,” he swallowed, his round face struck with remorse and an innocent touch of timidness.
“You already do,” Jaime’s soft whisper wafted across, no context nor connection explaining his intervention.

Diverted from Pod, she flung her attention back to her husband. “What?”

“Haunt my dreams,” he explained, his voice quiet and distant, and his eyes devoid of the usual life in them, “nightmares, to be precise--”

She bit the inside of her cheek. “Ser Jaime--”

“Nightmares in the literal sense, my lady,” he silenced her in a vacant tone, a deadened look taking over his face. “Weeks have gone by, and all I’ve dreamed of is your death, Brienne. Every other night, I wake up sweating, relieved to find you by my side, thanking the fates that this was nought but an illusion conjured by my troubled mind,” he finished with a pained sigh.

Her heart went out to him, his concern for her wellbeing unmatched with anything anyone had ever expressed for her. “Is that why you decided to smuggle me out of here?”

He reclined, resting his arms along the sides of the boat. “I overheard Cersei issuing orders to murder you,” he exhaled, his eyes continuing to burn into hers. “She instructed Qyburn to infuse your next meal with the strongest poison he could find. My father is gone, and with him, his promise to protect you. My sister despises you. She’ll leave no stone unturned to obliterate every trace of you from the face of this world.”

“I--” With so much to say, but at an utter loss of words, she managed a subdued, “I appreciate what you’re doing for me, Ser Jaime. I owe you--”

“How?” he growled. “You owe me nothing, my lady, on the other hand--”

“What?” Brienne demanded.

He turned away, resorting to the cover of the darkness. “Nothing. Why don’t you get some sleep?”

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“M’lady, Ser,” Pod announced, “we’ve reached.”

By the time they’d disembarked and sent the boat away with one of Bronn’s representatives who’d been waiting for them, it was time to board the ship to their next destination.

Once inside, Jaime led them to a cabin they were to occupy. “I’ve only arranged for one room,” he told her. “I’ve only arranged for one room,” he told her. “We’re supposed to be travelling as commoners, our pockets filled with just the bare minimum. I could’ve got us separate rooms,” he apologetically explained to her, “but that might give the ruse away.”

“This is good enough,” she appreciated his initiative, taking in the sparsely furnished room which had no more than a bed and a table to house their belongings.

“You can take the bed,” he offered, his suggestion to stay apart, for a change and to her surprise, disappointing her. “Pod and I can manage on the floor.”

“You don’t have to, I haven’t--” banished you from my bed, she almost said in irritation, but held her tongue when Podrick knocked on the door.

Jaime beckoned him inside. “Come in, Pod.”
“Your things, m’lady,” he said, setting a couple of bags along a corner of the table, “and here are yours m’lord.”

“Thank you, Podrick,” said Jaime, peering curiously at the boy, “but where’s your stuff?”

Pod coloured, then nervously glanced at Brienne as if to seek her approval for something. “What is it?” she asked.

“I--” he stuttered, blood rushing to his plump cheeks, “I just met this girl outside--”

“What an interesting beginning to an adventure!” Jaime encouraged him with a wide smile. “My brother was quite right about your extraordinary prowess--” Pausing his praise for the boy, he went on to elaborate for Brienne’s benefit, “He wants to spend the rest of the voyage in this girl’s company. In her cabin.”

Pod’s face was redder than a tomato when he mumbled, “If you permit, my lady.”

“Go ahead,” Brienne granted him her consent, “just be careful, though,” she warned, as an afterthought.

Beaming his gratitude, the elated squire bolted away, leaving her alone with a grinning Jaime. “Prowess in what?” she demanded, once Pod was out of earshot.

“In pleasuring a woman,” he answered with a playful wink, his voice a pleasing rumble. “If Tyrion and Bronn are to be believed, his skills are quite noteworthy, my lady.” He settled himself on the bed beside her. “I could, perhaps, learn something from him.”

Before she could quell it, the fire in her belly began rapidly rising, the flames consuming her as her mind exploded into a rapture of fantasies. A stream of vivid images began playing across her consciousness, visions of him wrapped around her, gloriously naked with his skin searing into hers. Hungry kisses, he showered her with, and touched parts of her no man had ever been privy to before. He went all the way, tasting her, devouring her, unleashing his magnificent sword into the depths of her. She nicked her tongue by accident, her breathing becoming heavier by the second while the elaborate scene continued to unfold before her mind’s eye, his delightful torture reducing her to a writhing moaning mess. All in her imagination, it was, but it left her head spinning, and she grabbed the bedpost in a frantic bid to mitigate her embarrassment. But sanity, unfortunately, failed to prevail, and she gasped, “That won’t be necessary,” before realizing she’d spoken aloud.

He shifted to kneel in front of her. “What do you mean?”

Awakened to reality and his actual presence, she sat up, flustered, briskly grabbing her bag to avert his attention and put him off her predicament, warding him off with a brusque, “Nothing.”

Jaime, however, was far from dissuaded by her abrupt dismissal. “What’s wrong?” he observed, lost in her eyes. “You look as if something’s troubling you.”

“I was just--just lost in thoughts about someone,” she blurted again, unthinking. “Something,” she corrected herself, fighting hard not to blush whilst cursing her carelessness.

He arched towards her, unblinking, venturing into the depths of her eyes. “Me?”

“What? No!” she cried in vehement denial, his blazing gaze hitting her with a sweet wave of agony.

“Other men, then?” he pursued relentlessly. When she opened her mouth to shoot down his allegation, his expression soured. “Renly, perhaps?”
“Yes, I was just thinking about Renly,” she jumped at the suggestion, glad to have been gifted a credible excuse. “I have--”

The words went dead on her lips and her throat ended up a parched mess when he made a sudden movement to her side and claimed her wrist in an iron grip. “Renly, it always has to be, huh?” he whispered, tilting his face close to hers, the wisp of his breath tickling her face aggravating her distress. “Are you ever going to get over the pretty boy?”

“Ser Jaime--” she croaked, a needy ache building up her groin as she began to sink in his seductive eyes.

As quickly as he’d seized her hand, he released her. “Apologies, my lady,” he mumbled, leaping off the bed, “I didn’t mean to pry, it’s just that I--”

“--despise Renly,” she concluded. “I’m aware of your contempt for him, but why?”

He pondered before throwing a vague, “Many reasons,” in response.

“Name one,” she insisted, genuinely intrigued by his revulsion for the handsome king.

His eyes darted to the door. “It’s time for lunch. Let’s get something to eat first. I’m famished.”

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Born in the Sapphire Isles, Brienne was no stranger to voyages, journey by sea as normal as mounting a horse for her. She stood at the deck, taking in the miles and miles of emptiness and void, the orange hue of the setting sun and its warm glow reflected in the waters beneath her enveloping her with the warmth of tranquillity. She was at peace with the world with no cares to bother her, not for the moment at least.

Until his voice came teasing along, rupturing the satisfying bubble of peace she’d been floating in. “Dreaming about your dead king again?”

Startled out of the realm of contentment she’d retreated to, she wheeled around. “None of your concern,” she retorted, fearing his arrival might leave her in a state of disarray again. “Where’s Pod?” she asked, eager to disrupt his unnecessary inquiry.

“In the arms of some lucky woman, I suppose,” he drawled, tethering her to his dreamy eyes, “showing her the stars and the moon, taking her to places she’s never been to before, touching her, kissing her, fucking her--”

“Enough,” she shut him up, but more importantly, shut her wandering mind off, anxious about the tormenting visions it might conjure again. “There’s no need for details. I’m not an idiot.”

He tossed her another of those smiles that could melt her into a helpless puddle. “You’ve begun to care for the boy, wench. You look upon him like your son--”

“I don’t,” she said, and her chest twisted in painful knots at the realization that she’d never have a son.

“You’d make a wonderful mother, though,” he predicted, “tough, yet full of love.”

She scoffed at his unrealistic visions of a future she’d never wake up to. “I’d make a terrible mother. However,” she slipped into self-consolation, “that’s not something I need to bother about. I’m never going to have children.”
“Never say never, Brienne,” he warned, the edges of his eyes crinkling with the warmth of his smile. “You never know when things might take a turn. Before you can realize it, fate might land you in places you’d never imagined yourself to be in.”

“I’m married to you, but that doesn’t mean I want to build a family with you,” she retorted, despite her heart not quite concurring with her.

“I wasn’t talking about myself,” he murmured, withdrawing at once, the sparkle in his eyes shrouded by a veil of hurt. “I know you don’t--”

“I’m sorry it came out like that,” she immediately apologized, guilty that she’d upset him. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

He nodded, shifting his gaze to the nothingness outside.

“Seven blessings to you!” chimed a musical voice from behind them, and Brienne turned around to find two young women regarding them with utmost curiosity.

“To you too,” Jaime replied amicably. “We were just going.” When he made to leave, one of them, a pretty blonde, blocked his path.

“I could leave with you,” she simpered, sidling up to him and fluttering her lashes.

“I don’t think--” he began to object, when her red-haired companion slid closer to Brienne.

“Where are you from?” she inquired, throwing Brienne a suggestive look.

*I’m not into women,* Brienne was about to retort loudly, when she recalled her disguise. “Not interested,” she grunted, hoping it would push the girl away.

The redhead scowled at her. “As you wish,” she muttered, then sauntered away, leaving them with the blonde who was still eyeing Jaime like she’d want to devour him.

“Are you--” purred the girl, inching uncomfortably closer to Jaime “-- not interested too?”

Despite the freshly grown beard covering most of his face, Brienne could make out faint dots of red. “I--”

“A drink, maybe?” she invited, blinking so vigorously now, that Brienne wished her lashes would detach and fall off.

His initial discomfort evaporating into thin air, Jaime rewarded her with his most charming smile. “Why not?” He held out his hand, which the stranger was only too glad to accept, and without a glance at Brienne, he slipped away into the crowd with the girl clinging to him like a bloody leech.

Brienne was left fretting and staring after them. I don’t care who he sleeps with, she convinced herself, then began pacing the deck like a wounded lioness, hoping the exercise might relieve her raging mind.

*Our marriage is just a deal, he’s not bound to me for real.* Her fists balled in rage, she wished a hundred unmentionable punishments for the strange woman who’d appeared out of nowhere to steal her friend, her husband.

“Anything bothering you, m’lady?”

Caught unawares, she slowed down to speak to her visitor. “Podrick,” she acknowledged him,
stopping to catch her breath. “Aren’t you supposed to be with--”

“I was,” admitted the boy, blushing again, “but I saw you from afar. You looked disturbed, so I thought I’d--”

The concern in his eyes brought a smile to her face. “Thank you, Pod,” she said, meaning it from the bottom of the heart. “There’s nothing to worry about, I’m quite alright.”

He turned to leave, but hesitated, as if he wanted to say something.

“Is there something else?” she gently prompted.

He wiped his palm on his trousers. “I wanted to ask you something, m’lady.”

“Go on.”

“Could you teach me how to fight?” he requested in all earnestness. “I’ve heard a lot about you, from Lord Tyrion and Ser Jaime--”

“I’m no good at teaching anyone,” she declined, reminded of her training with Jaime and how there would be none of it anymore.

“You are,” he gushed, his eyes shining with pride. “You’ve helped Ser Jaime put his left hand to use.”

She considered his request, wondering how, possibly, could this clumsy lad even learn to hold a sword properly.

“Please,” he implored.

“Very well,” she relented. “Meet me here every morning for the rest of our journey and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Can I come too?” asked a familiar deep voice behind them, announcing his presence.

Brienne spun around, then flung their visitor the coldest glare she could manage. “How is it that you’re back so soon, Ser Jaime?”

Sensing the tension between them, Podrick hurriedly tried to excuse himself. “I’ll take your leave, m’lady. I won’t be seeing you tonight--”

“We know that, Pod,” Jaime cut in, grinning. “Do your best with her.”

The moment Pod was out of sight, she unleashed her fury on Jaime, her frustration bursting at its seams, waiting for an outlet. “Why did you come back? Did she refuse to let you in her bed?”

The smile melted away, and in its place was soulful seriousness. “Believe me, wench, no woman has ever been able to do that,” he said in the deep-throated low-pitched tone that always managed to give her goosebumps, “not even you.”

She stared in disbelief at his pathetic attempt at a reconciliation. “Oh, shut your mouth!”

He narrowed his eyes to take a proper look at her, and when he searched her eyes, the grin was back. “Are you jealous, my lady?”

She scoffed, hoping it would keep her real feelings under wraps. “You wish.”
“You’re worried,” he said, studying her, “that another woman might lay her claim to what, by your right and the will of the Seven, belongs to you.”

The heat pooled in her cheeks enough to reduce her to cinders, she decided to put an end to the torture he was inflicting on her. “That’s enough, I’m leaving.”

“I’m yours, wench,” he whispered, capturing her gaze just as she was about to slip away, “I will always be yours.”

Speechless and motionless, breathless and numb, she stood there awhile, making no attempt to avert her eyes nor escape. “Wasn’t that what we’d promised each other at the Sept? Not once, but twice,” he refreshed her memory, upon which she realized her folly, the whole exchange reducing her to a smitten idiot. While he was merely abiding by the vows they’d exchanged, keeping the word given he’d given her in a marriage that saw no future, she’d assumed it to be—for a second she’d been foolish enough to believe him, to think that he actually--

Brushing the thought aside, she decided to bring up the matter that had been nagging her for a while. “What happens to our marriage now?” she tentatively broached the delicate subject. “Your father--”

“--has no control over you anymore. You know that.” He stepped away to put some distance between them. “Nor does anyone else in my family. You’re no longer bound by these vows, Brienne.”

No Tywin to dictate her life. No Cersei to torment her anymore. She was redeemed from the shackles of an unwanted marriage. She could pursue her quest, find Sansa and devote her life to Lady Catelyn’s family. She’d never see Jaime again, never be a victim of his taunts, never bear the brunt of his arrogance. The wind was finally beginning to blow in her favour.

_I should be happy_, she told herself, her temples throbbing with a dull ache. _Why this sense of emptiness?_

“What about you?” she asked, dousing her voice with artificial normalcy.

“I’m free too, to pursue my will.”

_He did it only to save me. No other reason, not when Cersei commands his love, his life, his… everything._ Her heart tumbled through several layers of disappointment. “Are you going to get our marriage annulled?”

A long pause followed her question, and then the reply came, every word stabbing her like the sharpest knife to have breached her flesh. “There’s no other way out if I have to join the Kingsguard again.”

He’d declared his decision with such finality that there was no more to be said after that. “Good night, Ser Jaime,” she said, then took off, not wanting to dwell on illusions that could never assume the form of reality.

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Morning came with the usual swiftness associated with it. She didn’t know when she’d dozed off, and oblivious to his familiar presence on the bed, she’d slept like a log. The conversation before they’d parted had left her stressed and exhausted, a good night’s sleep the best remedy to ease her out of this mess she’d landed herself in.

“You left without fully hearing me out, Brienne,” he groggily complained, stretching his arms beside
her.

“I thought we were done. There was nothing more to be said, was there?” If she had to sail through the rest of the journey without broken feelings, the best thing would be to steer clear of sensitive subjects.

Jaime seemed to agree. “Right.”

“I’m going out to meet Podrick,” she informed him, hoping the diversion would do her some good.

He nodded his approval. “He’s in good hands.”

“Although, you can join if you want,” she invited, before she could prevent herself.

A smile flickered across his face. “You’ll lose, my lady.”

She returned his smile. “Challenge accepted.”

They got dressed and met Podrick on the deck, thus commencing his training, one of many such mornings to come. The boy was a novice, as expected, and Brienne had to begin with teaching him the basics.

“That’s enough for today,” she said, trying not to sound too harsh when she knocked him to the ground for what was probably the fourth or fifth time in the past couple of minutes. “You’ll learn,” she consoled him when he’d retreated to a corner, looking thoroughly defeated. “It’ll take time.”

“You and me,” said Jaime suddenly, pulling out his blade. “What say you, Brienne, for old times sake?”

Giving him no time to prepare, nor a chance to read her strategy, she lunged at him with full force. Unfazed by the unforeseen attack, he parried the blow with such agility that she was left panting and pleasantly surprised. “You’ve improved,” she grunted, her eyes straying away from his sword and to his beard. “Have you been practicing?” She allowed herself the luxury of a distraction, her eyes feasting on the wet trail of sweat along his neck, before moving on to settle on the damp shirt clinging to his chest, highlighting the contours of his well-toned structure.

“Not without you,” he roared, then advanced towards her, forcing her attention off the enticing sight she was engrossed in. Distracted, she was blank and unresponsive for a fraction of a second, then steadied her grip on Oathkeeper’s pommel, ready to strike again. By the time she reacted, it was too late, for he pounced on her without warning, turning the tables on her. “Never without you, my lady,” he added, keeping up his attack with vigour she’d never met before.

Their roles now reversed, she was the one fighting to defend herself while he began raining blows at her. Many helpless and aimless attempts later, he had her sprawled on the ground and pinned under him, struggling and wriggling to free herself.

“Yield,” he softly mouthed, his chest pressing into her hardened nipples while his lips hovered over hers.

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With their progressing journey, the days began to roll by, some boring, others mildly interesting, some uneventful, others filled with tension like the night the blonde woman who had an eye on Jaime had returned to fling herself at him.
Brienne watched the woman attach herself to him, gritting her teeth and cursing under her breath, relaxing only after she’d left them alone. “I thought you were done with her,” she fumed, picking her nails under the table as she sipped her ale.

Jaime broke into a smile. “You hate her!” he gleefully exclaimed, absorbing her anger and frustration. “You’re jealous, wench,” he reiterated his observation, “admit it.”

She bounced to her feet. “I’m not,” she asserted, then anxious to get the hell out of there, she slammed her glass down on the table. “I’m going to sleep. Come when you’ve finished with her, or better still, don’t come at all.” She intensified her glare, the ale in her blood making her feel ten times bolder than her usual self. “I don’t care if you spend the night with her, nor does it matter to me if you--” fuck her, she was about to say, but couldn’t bring herself to mouth the words.

Her outburst left him open-mouthed, and she stormed away, hoping for sleep, as always, to provide her a safe passage out of the tedious situation she’d worked her way into.

Back behind the closed doors of their room, she flung herself on the bed, and the steady rhythm of the rocking vessel began lulling her into a comforting realm of her own. A world where Cersei didn’t exist, nor did this stupid blonde who repeatedly made an idiot of herself by throwing herself into Jaime’s arms. Poor little naive girl, Brienne huffed to herself, frowning at the blank ceiling, she knows not that the moon can only be admired from a distance.

Piercing the barrier to get into Jaime Lannister’s heart was impossible as long as his sister resided there. Many had tried. Many had failed. And so would this silly young maiden. She was just another in the long queue of young women who’d do anything for him.

Images of the unknown blonde morphed into Cersei’s, and Brienne began drifting away, surrendering to the heaviness of her drooping eyelids, leaving the two hateful women to be dealt with by her subconscious.

“He’ll never be yours,” spat Cersei, and if eyes had the power to kill, Brienne would’ve died a million brutal deaths by now.

“He could be mine, though,” sang the unknown blonde, “I’m younger and more beautiful.”

“I’m his wife. He is mine, and I am his,” Brienne yelled over the two squabbling women. “I love him--”

“Wake up, wench,” cooed a tender voice in her ear, but trapped in her web of despair, she was unable to find her way out.

“I love him,” she cried, shutting her eyes tight whilst grabbing him in an embrace. “I do. More than my life, more than anything else.” Unwilling to let go, she clung to him for dear life, her fingers tangled in the spread of hair on his chest.

He pulled her closer, his steady arms enveloping her in a comforting hold, the warmth of his body calming her down. “Brienne, it’s me. Get up.”

When she opened her eyes, there was no sign of Cersei or any strange blonde. She was in bed with Jaime, in his arms, wrapped in an intimate embrace.

“You’ve been dreaming,” he whispered, the moist heat of his breath kissing her neck.

She drew away, shaken. “I’m sorry,” she sheepishly mumbled, jumping off the bed and straightening her clothes. “You should’ve told me off, pushed me away.”
He folded his arms across his chest, lost in thought for a moment. “You mumbled something in your sleep, that you love--” he looked directly at her “--was it--”

“Renly, yes,” she interrupted, seizing the excuse before he could speak further. “Just another stupid dream.”

He stiffened upon hearing the name, and followed her out of the bed, his jaw tightening. “Get dressed,” he said, his tone crisp and formal, every trace of fondness evaporating off it. “We’re nearing Tarth.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience and apologies for the long break.

Up Next : Jaime meets his Father-in-law
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

An evening in Tarth :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Brienne was transported to a new world, and for a while, it felt too good to be true.

A grand reception they were welcomed to, and a heartwarming moment it was, to be reunited with her father and the home she’d set foot in after years. To stay put someplace after days of travel was more than a blessing, and when they had bathed and dressed, they immediately pounced on the invitation to a lavish breakfast. Well fed and reasonably rested, her mind was at ease when she and Jaime joined the Evenstar in his study. A lot to tell, there was, and a lot to hear, so much to look forward to in the few precious days of pure leisure she could afford herself the luxury of.

“This is such a pleasant surprise. I never thought I’d see you again,” gushed her father, drinking her in with eyes full of concern, disbelief and unshed tears of joy once they’d slipped into a conversation. “Particularly after Locke refused my offer for your ransom.”

“I was partly responsible for that,” Jaime confessed sheepishly. “Had it not been for my exaggeration about the Sapphire mining in Tarth and the extent of your wealth, she’d have been released to your safe custody much earlier, and all the torture she’d had to endure could’ve been spared.”

“You were well away, but you still came back for me,” she jumped to his defence, her chest swelling in gratitude and so many other emotions she dared not give a name to.

“I couldn’t not come, Brienne,” he whispered, his eyes inviting hers for a silent conversation, and she couldn’t resist, her mind in a state of stormy unrest once more.

Why, she demanded, her eyes putting forth the question she’d thrown at him before, and he answered her with a soft blink, the subtlety in it heightening her frustration. Before she could wordlessly probe him further, he looked away, hurriedly turning his attention to her father.

“Such a hastily arranged ceremony yours turned out to be,” remarked her father, not out of disapproval, nor in a complaining sort of way. “Your father wrote me to seek my consent, but gave me no time to respond. Quite impatient, he seemed to be, to get it over with, Ser Jaime.”

“I apologize on his behalf,” was Jaime’s guilt-laden reply. “He was worried I’d change my mind if he wasted even a minute. He didn’t want to risk having me go back on my word to marry Brienne.”

Brienne had to marvel at how easily he was able to string together a convincing yarn of lies. Her father took a while to digest this, a frown of uncertainty creasing his forehead. “You could’ve had any beautiful noblewoman,” he wondered aloud, voicing the obvious doubt anyone would’ve had. “Any woman would’ve thrown herself at you, maidens far prettier and much more accomplished. Why didn’t you wed any of them? Why my daughter?”

“Because she was the only woman who didn’t,” came Jaime’s prompt reply, his eyes twinkling.
The lack of clarity in his words greatly vexed her. “Didn’t--what?” she wanted to know, before her father could respond.

“Throw herself at me,” he explained, speaking directly to her father. “That she didn’t succumb to my charm and treated me like any other man, worse than other men at times, intrigued me since the day I met her.”

Didn’t succumb to his charm, indeed!

Her tongue caught between her teeth, she blinked hard before resorting to examine the woodwork of the table, using it as a reason to bury away her wanton desires, feelings, she feared, her eyes might inadvertently reveal. You don’t know how wrong you are, she lamented to herself, ruing her fate, knowing she could never make her inner voice heard.

“Beauty isn’t what our eyes bear witness to, Lord Selwyn,” Jaime furthered his tale, deeply entangled in his web of fantasy with no way out into the real world, and Brienne felt herself blushing at his fake kindness, her palms dampening with sweat. “It is a virtue buried deep inside, down the crevices of one’s heart and the far within the depths of their soul. Once uncovered, it shines brighter than the purest gold and is far more precious than the clearest sapphire, taking your breath away, knocking your feet off the ground.”

Enough of these stories, she felt like clamping his mouth shut, but she couldn’t bring herself to silence him, wishing for him to keep going with his honeyed words, to profess his affection for her, fake, though it may be.

Her father didn’t appear to be entirely convinced. “Are you saying my daughter is--”

“I’m saying, I was fortunate to spot in her the qualities no one else did,” he elucidated, compelling Brienne to look at him, for she could no longer avoid him. “Beauty is kindness, compassion and purity of the heart. Beauty is sincerity, honesty and the ability to call me an asshole whenever I’ve acted like one.”

Her father raised his brows, then leaned forward in his chair with an expression of polite curiosity. “How did you two meet?”

“In a filthy cell in the Tully camp, on the night I was nearly slaughtered to pieces,” revealed Jaime, smiling faintly at the recollection. “She was standing at the entrance, guarding her lady and glaring at me, ready to cut me down at the slightest provocation.”

“And provoke her, you did, in the nastiest way possible,” Brienne spoke up, the flowery praises he’d showered on her melting away like ice, the dreamy picture he’d presented earlier vanishing like a wisp of smoke. “You wasted no time nor the opportunity to ridicule my looks. A typical man.” She glowered, every word he had uttered then stinging her even today like the worst venom ever. “Like every other who has ever set eyes on me.”

“From the very first minute of our adventure she’d been waiting for a chance to bite my head off,” he chuckled. “If it weren’t for Lady Stark’s orders to get me to King’s Landing alive, your daughter would’ve devoured me, Lord Selwyn--” he stared into the distance, pausing for a second’s consideration “--or perhaps, bitten my head off.”

“But she didn’t,” said Lord Selwyn, smiling affectionately at both of them. “You hated each other, arch enemies that you were. While I can gather that much, when did things change?”

“When he saved me from rape,” she confessed in a small voice, the traumatic incident still fresh in
her mind, “and lost his hand because of me.”

“When she motivated me to stop whining after I’d lost my hand,” he revealed at the same time she’d spoken, unfurling facts for a change instead of a fluffy ball of wool. “When she cleaned me up - my shit, literally, and everything else when no one else would come near me.” With a deep sigh, he concluded, “When she egged me on to stay alive, showing no mercy nor pity for my condition, dragging me to my feet with her ruthless encouragement.”

“Respect and regard for each other, no doubt, and a dash of Lord Tywin’s persuasion skills,” her father summarised. “I’m glad this match has come to be and you’ve reconciled to each other. Marriages are rarely forged out of love these days, and I’m sure what you share is more than sufficient to last you a lifetime. Love will be born out of familiarity and togetherness as the years roll along, and that’s what makes a successful arranged marriage,” advised her father.

_I love him._

She’d almost said it out aloud, nearly brought upon herself the danger of opening her heart out to them. The weight of those three simple words had hung around her for days, haunting her like hell, plain and blunt, clear as daylight. His story was merely a means to convince her father, a ruse he had to keep up to sustain this marriage for as long as it was supposed to last, but what she’d been undergoing was far more profound, her feelings for him running deeper than just respect or regard, her never-ending yearning for him stabbing her into a thousand tiny pieces of despair.

Her anxiety began mounting with every passing minute, the worry that she might stupidly and inadvertently admit her feelings to Jaime beginning to eat her from within. “I--I’m feeling unwell,” she feebly announced, bringing up the first easy excuse that hit her mind, then shot to her feet, eager to be away from his vicinity, desperate to ward off any sticky questions.

“I’ve arranged for a feast tonight,” her father informed just as she was about to take off. “In your honour,” he explained, looking at Jaime as well. “To celebrate your union--”

Brienne shot her father a look of dismay. “That isn’t necessary,” she objected, the guilt that, someday, she’d have to let her father in on the truth that this wasn’t a union of their hearts, but a deal, an agreement signed under duress with Tywin Lannister in exchange for her life.

“Sit down for a minute, Brienne,” her father commanded, his tone weary, but firm, an edge of authority to it. “There’s something you both ought to know.”

She returned to her seat, only now noticing the patches of redness in his eyes, a sign, probably, that he hadn’t slept well. He drew in a sharp breath before finally unveiling what was in his mind. “I’ve not been in the prime of my health these days, Brienne.”

A nauseating wave of dread crept up her chest. “What do you mean?” she demanded, trying not to get overly agitated and imagine the worst.

“I don’t know how long I’ll live,” he sighed. “Maybe a year, maybe two, probably five, or if I’m fortunate, even ten or more,” he tried to estimate, rubbing his tired eyes. “The problem with my ailment is unpredictability. I can’t put a number to the years left in me.”

“What’s the matter?” Jaime asked, his tone soft and compassionate. “Is there anything we can do to help?”

Her father shook his head. “My heart is weak, the maester says, and there’s no remedy to strengthen it. It is getting weaker with my age and it’s only a matter of time before--”
“Father,” she gasped, reaching across the table to wring his hand. “I should’ve been here for you, with you--”

“Had you stayed back here, you’d never have surrendered to matrimony,” her father cut in. “You’re my heir, child--” he gazed at her affectionately “--my Evenstar. You’re going the right way, on the path to build a life, a family for yourself.” He directed his contented eyes at Jaime. “You’re going to bear my heirs. Sons and daughters to succeed you, and I hope I live long enough to see at least the first of many to be born.”

“Father,” she whispered again, tears pricking the corners of her eyes, that they were betraying him with a pack of lies nagging her and pushing her to reveal it all. “There’s something we have to tell you. Things aren’t as rosy as they appear to be,” she began, not having the heart to keep him in the dark any longer.

“What is it, my dear?” inquired her father. “Is something bothering you?”

“Yes, I--uh--” Hesitant, she glanced at Jaime for his assistance.

Her father looked from one to another, a veil of concern shrouding his features. “What’s wrong?” he asked her, the worry in his eyes accompanied by insecurity. “I hope you haven’t married him under compulsion, my dear,” he told her, then turning to Jaime, he went on, “Ser Jaime, I sincerely hope you’re satisfied with this match, that she keeps you--”

“I couldn’t have wished for a better wife,” Jaime intervened, before Brienne could spit out the truth. “I love your daughter, Lord Selwyn,” he went on, his earnestness in his tone, and above all, his unexpected words knocking the air out of her lungs, “more than Cersei, more than anyone else.”

To stone, she’d turned to, at Jaime’s sudden proclamation, the relief that washed over her father’s face leaving her in disbelief. “For a while I thought this marriage was forced upon you, that your father--” He stopped talking, then reached across the table to grab Jaime’s hand. “Give me your word, Ser Jaime,” he insisted, “promise me that you’ll never leave her side.”

Jaime gave him a reassuring nod. “I’ll never let go of her hand, Lord Selwyn. I am hers,” he firmly declared, throwing her a fleeting glance out of the corner of his eye, “and she is mine. Until the end of my days. If you believe enough to rely on the word of an oathbreaker like me--”

“You’re no oathbreaker,” Brienne leapt to correct him, her voice breaking, “you’re the only man I’ve ever trusted, I--”

“She loves you too,” surmised her father, taking a long hard look at her moist eyes, “I was mistaken. This is a marriage born out of love.”

“I’m no king, but she’s my queen,” Jaime carried on. “Today, and for every other day to come. A part of me, always she’ll be. My heart, my soul and my very existence are, and will continue to be dominated by her.”

Wide eyed and dumbstruck, all Brienne could do was stare at her husband. Effortlessly cooking up stories, no doubt, was a skill he was born with, but the ability to do it with the emotional correctness he’d just showcased was something else entirely. The way he made his little speech, anyone in her father’s place would be fooled into thinking they were a couple madly in love, desperate to spend every minute of their lives in each other’s arms. If this had merely been a mutually-benefitting pact between them, she’d have appreciated this show of mock tenderness, for it seemed every bit natural as a profession of love ought to be, but her feelings and her deep desire for him left her far from impressed and aching within.
“Brienne,” her father addressed her. She sat up straight, and when she’d returned from the fantastical world she’d wandered into, she noticed that her father was smiling. He appeared to be genuinely happy. “You’re lucky to have gained a husband who loves you this much. May the Seven bless you, my child,” he effused, letting go of Jaime’s and grasping her hand, “and you too, Ser Jaime. Now what was it that you were about to tell me?” he asked, his curiosity and concern rising, his elation slowly melting away.

“Father, I cannot stay here, not at the moment, at least.” Brienne said, ignoring the agony within, “I swore a vow to Lady Catelyn,” she confided, revealing the less-harmful part of the truth to him. “I have to find her daughter and get her to her family.”

“By all means, fulfil your oath, my dear,” her father magnanimously granted her his approval. “But once that is done, once you’re free to pursue your life, I’ll be awaiting your arrival here, to take your rightful place as my successor. I wish for you both to carry my line ahead, my legacy and my blood-”

“You will get your heirs, Lord Selwyn,” Jaime assured him again before she could answer. “You have my word and--” he gave Brienne a slight nod and a subtly reassuring blink “--hers too. Right, Brienne?”

Something in his eyes commanded her to agree, and give in to him, she did. “Yes, father,” she found herself murmuring her consent, refusing to picture the day she’d go back on this.

“And I’ll watch her back, Lord Selwyn,” Jaime promised. “Always.”

“I should’ve been here for you,” she repeated, shaking her head and unable to shake the guilt off. “I’ve been a terrible daughter to you.”

“I’ve been a terrible father,” he admitted, with remorse, “I should’ve let you be yourself instead of trying to convert you into the girl you never wanted to be.” With a deep sigh, he rose, indicating that their little meeting had come to an end. “Now, I’m not going to die today. So why don’t we all put aside this gloom get ready for the feast? I’ve asked the Septa to find you something suitable to wear for the evening--”

Brienne’s stomach did a lurch, memories of age-old unpleasantness returning to torment her. “Not Septa Roelle, I hope?” she asked, trying not to sound like the little girl who’d been criticized and ridiculed by the woman who could never see the good in her.

“Don’t worry,” her father laughed. “Septa Elyse will look after you and get the seamstress to you at once. I’m looking forward to seeing you and your husband at the celebration.”

*My husband.*

Her stomach leaped again, this time, her heart joining it somewhere above her chest.

“Is the feast that important?” she whined, the crowd of thoughts in her head making her want to retire to her room spend the rest of their days in peace. “You’re not well, I’d rather be spending all the time I have here with you.”

“Our people need to meet you,” he insisted, “to get to know their future leader and her lord husband.”

Another disturbing thought struck her. “What if word of this reaches King’s Landing?” she sounded her concern to Jaime, worried about the impact the news of this celebration might generate. “What if Cersei traces you to this island? What if she tries to harm you?”
“She won’t come to know,” Jaime assured her with an air of confidence. “Unless Tarth happens to house her spies, a little celebration like this isn’t going to make noise enough to be heard at the capital.” He tossed her a disarming grin. “For a change, why don’t you let go of your cares, Brienne. If her men are lurking around, we’re in danger at this very moment. If not, we’d only be wasting precious days, worrying. Either way, there’s no point in overthinking, is there?”

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Back to her favourite stretch of the seashore, Brienne paced around, hoping a walk would calm her nerves and do her some good.

She paused to think, soothing her eyes by feasting on the cool blue that waters that reflected the setting sun. For the first time in her life, she’d lied. To her father. And it left a sour taste in her mouth, something that would lie on her chest as a burden forever, disturbing her until she rid herself of it by confiding in him. Deciding to do the right thing, she wanted to speak to him right away, to tell him that she’d made a mistake, that this was no marriage but a web of fantasies they’d created to keep him in the dark.

Keen to get home immediately, she bolted off, only to collide headlong into Jaime. “Watch where you’re going, wench,” came his irate voice. “Why are you in such a hurry?”

“I’m going to tell my father the truth about our marriage,” she announced with rocky firmness, then determined to stick to her decision, she turned away.

“You can’t do that.” He grabbed her arm and stood in her way, obstructing her exit.

“Why? Worried that your fake promises would be exposed?” she cried, still upset with the impact his words had made on her.

He frowned, dropping his hand. “What fake promises?”

This time she made no attempt to get away. No, she wouldn’t leave. Not unless he provided her with some explanation. “The ones you made to my poor father, the picture of falsities you presented before him,” she said, her voice and pitch rising a notch. “That you’d stand by me forever—”

His eyes threatened to raze her to the ground. “Who told you that was fake? I meant every word of whatever I said, Brienne.”

Stunned, all she could do was open and close her mouth like a fish. “Do you even know what you’re saying?” she mumbled when she'd found her tongue, shock leaving every nerve-tip in her body incapable of reacting elsewise.

“I’m proposing that we stay married,” he said, hitting her with another bolt of lightning. “For as long as Lord Selwyn lives,” he added, to dispel all ambiguity and answer the next question on the tip of her tongue.

“We have separate destinies to fulfil, so how is it even possible for us to co-exist?” she asked, wondering if a stray wave of insanity had struck him, rendering him incapable of taking logical decisions.

“We can stay married, but lead separate lives as you wish,” he explained, and she searched his eyes, desperate to know if this was another of his jokes. But sincerity was all she found in them, leaving her all the more aghast, for a marriage spent pining for one’s unrequited love was no better than a lie.

The possibility of leading such a life leaving her jittery and unsettled, she wanted to nip it in the bud
before it could grow into something out of either of their control. “We can’t,” she decided, shaking her head with all the vigour she could muster.

“Think about it,” Jaime said, attacking her with his Lannister persuasion skills. “We could play along for as long as your father’s alive—”

“He could live for years!” she exclaimed, “and I hope he does, then what happens to—”

“I wish the same, and I’m ready to do this for as long as it takes.”

Still unconvinced, she refused, “No.”

“Did you notice how happy your father was to see us together?” he continued to push her. “This is a golden opportunity for you to keep him in good spirits in his remaining years.”

“What about your sister?” she demanded, dreading his reaction, fearing the emotions the reference to his love might bring to life in him.

He took a deep breath, and gulped, and she could make out his chest heaving under stress. “I’d rather not talk about her at the moment,” he murmured.

Once again his evasive words had left her confused. His unexpected suggestion had infused her with positivity for a while, hope attempting to break down the walls of despair in her mind, knocking on the doors to her heart, but his vague reply about Cersei drove her to lock in her feelings, closely guarding them behind an iron curtain. He might have left his sister’s side for her sake, but that, by no means, indicated he’d fallen out of love with her, the window of doubt about his loyalty to her still open.

“I can’t allow you to bind your fate to mine,” she continued to decline, certain that a loveless union would bring them nothing but agony. “Besides, marriage has no place in my life,” she stated her usual reason, remembering that she too couldn’t commit to a life with him.

“What if it had been Renly in my place?” he asked, sparks of rage flying off his eyes.

She nudged aside the comparison, focusing her attention on the sand beneath her feet. “You don’t have to do this--”

He raised her chin to bring her eyes on a level with his. “I didn’t make such tall vows to your father because I had to,” he softly clarified. “I’m doing it because I want to, Brienne. And rest assured, I’ll never try to stake claims on my rights as your husband. I will be no hindrance to you, neither in your quest for Sansa nor in any other aspect of your life.”

Her cheeks were suffused with warmth when another niggling issue jumped to her mind. “Sooner or later my father’s going to want his heirs. This is one promise neither of us can honour. Why, then, did you give him your word?” Her mind began racing, conjuring plausible excuses to be kept ready in case such a situation arose.

“One thing at a time, wench,” he tried to placate her with a smile that made her go weak in the knees. “I admit, I reacted on an impulse when he mentioned his heirs, but we’ll deal with that when it hits us. That apart, if not today, some day you’d have to settle for someone,” he went on, the grin widening and taking on a mischievous turn, “better me than old Wagstaff, isn’t it? Can’t say you ended up with a bad deal, my lady.”

Her face burning, she turned away.
“Is that a yes, wench?” he shouted, laughing at her discomfort. “Will you be my wife forever?”

Hiding a smile, she sped away, keeping her answer to herself.

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As soon as she returned to her room, a knock followed her, revealing her visitors to be the unknown Septa, who appeared to be a friendly middle-aged woman with the young seamstress at her heels.

“Septa Elyse,” Brienne acknowledged her, then ushered her and the other woman inside.

“My lady,” the younger woman replied, “I’m here at your father’s behest.” She thrust a huge bundle of cloth into Brienne’s arms. “Why don’t you try it on?” she encouraged, beaming at her work when Brienne unfolded the most beautiful gown she’d ever seen. Shimmering blue silk it was, with intricate thread work and the bluest sapphire-like stones woven into the fabric. “I hope I got your measurements right,” she remarked, helping Brienne undress and get into it.

She flushed, reminded of Jaime’s exact same words in a similar, yet very different context. The next few minutes were spent with her posing in front of the mirror and the girl making adjustments to the dress in a sincere endeavour to ensure that she was comfortable. She sighed wistfully, thinking of the moment this painful evening would come to an end, ridding her of this elaborate gown which she’d consented to wear with the sole intention to please her father.

A few minutes of torture later, another knock on the door followed. “Can I come in?” called Jaime from the other side.

Her palms, all of a sudden, turned clammy, and she felt suffocated under the weight of the silk and the bodice binding her chest. She was no beauty, and dresses far from suited her, making her look like an overgrown tree. What would he say? Would he criticise her?

“Y–yes,” she mumbled her permission, and the moment he stepped in, the two women by her side straightened, eagerly studying his face for a reaction.

“It’s perfect, my lady,” the Septa admired, examining her from top to toe. “What say you, my lord?” she sought Jaime’s opinion.

Jaime regarded her with interest, his eyes widening and narrowing in alternation as he absorbed every bit of her unusual garb. “Beautiful,” he announced his judgement, meeting her gaze.

The women tossed him a quick word of gratitude, then left, shutting the door behind them, leaving her alone with Jaime and her out-of-control nerves. “You didn’t have to lie in front of them,” she complained, certain that the compliment he’d obliged her with was a farce. “I’m hideous, much uglier--”

He made a sudden movement in her direction, and within an instant, was at an arm’s distance of her. His intense eyes silenced her, lodging second thoughts in her mind, questioning her doubts about the credibility of the opinion he’d voiced. “What makes you assume I’m lying?” he demanded, running a fingertip along her neckline, his nail ghosting the edge separating the fabric and her skin.

“I hate this dress,” she whispered her displeasure, ignoring the goosebumps that began erupting up her neck and chest with every little movement of his finger, “so I just thought you too might--”

“I’ve fallen in love with it,” he said, his finger coming to rest on her chest, “so much that I wish I could--” His chest heaving, he abruptly backed away, withdrawing his hand. “I should get dressed too.”
“What are you going to wear?” she asked, eager to find out.

He pulled out a bundle from beneath a stack of neatly arranged towels. “This,” he showed her, in his hand, a set of clothes which included a doublet in the exact shade of blue she’d worn.

“Those aren’t your house colours!” she exclaimed, running her fingers along the intricate work. “I assumed you’d wear red--”

“I quite like this, wench,” he said, the passional look returning to his eyes when he began stripping. “Matches your eyes.”

Her face on fire, she looked away, giving him the privacy to get dressed, her fingers constantly fiddling with the delicate stones on her chest for want of something to do as she glanced around idly. She paced awhile, then settled down to perch on the bed, and when that didn’t help quell her restlessness, she leapt to her feet again, hoping her moist palms wouldn’t give away her fragile emotional state.

“You can look now,” he announced, and when she did as told, she had to hold back a gasp, for he’d never looked this stunning before. He always looked regal in red, every inch the lion he was meant to be, but blue suited him no less. “How do I look?” he asked, scanning her eyes for a reaction.

“Very handsome,” she gushed, battling his eyes and the surge of heat that was threatening to invade her cheeks.

He folded his arms, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. “You think I’m handsome, wench?”

“What’s so surprising about that? Everyone does,” she blurted, another rush of uncontrolled words, a burst of unadulterated truth finding their way past her lips.

“Do you?” he persisted, ignoring her evasive answer.

Her eyes darted to the door, a welcome escape route from the trap she’d stupidly laid for herself. “We should go,” she said, striding to the door. “Let’s not keep father waiting.”

A second’s pause and a glance at her later, he followed suit. “As you wish, my lady,” he relented, holding out his arm for her.

They walked down to the hall together, and as soon as they entered, Brienne drew in a sharp breath, the extent of the crowd that had gathered there catching her off-guard. “I never expected so many people,” she muttered under her breath when they made their way to her father. “Feels odd, really.”

“They’re your people,” Jaime reminded her, “you’ll be their ruler one day.”

“I’m no ruler,” she retorted, “I can never--”

“Never say never, Brienne,” he whispered in her ear, leading her to where Lord Selwyn was seated.

A quick exchange of pleasantries later, she secluded herself to a corner where she wouldn’t be the centre of attention, and Jaime headed off in the direction of Podrick who appeared to be gainfully engaged with a pretty young lady. Safe where she was, she took to observing people, some of whom she knew, and others complete strangers.

The music began playing after a while, the pipes and harps filling the air around her with a pleasant melody, and within a flash, Jaime had appeared out of nowhere before her.
“Come on,” he said, holding out his hand.

Perplexed, she blinked. “Where?”

“The evening’s young,” he dreamily pointed out, “and the music’s begun playing.”

Still blank, she could manage no response except, “So?”

“May I have this dance, my lady?” he asked clearly this time, beckoning her to join him.

She went pale, the memory of her name day and the boys who’d mocked her returning to haunt her. “I don’t dance,” she refused, unwilling to let herself become a laughing stock for the second time in her life.

“If you can dance with Renly, you can surely dance with me,” he insisted, his voice laced with jealousy and an unmistakable tinge of ire. “Besides, I promised you a real dance, didn’t I?” At his words her mind raced back to the strange moment they’d shared many nights ago at King’s Landing, their own little private dance which had ended up a disaster thanks to her nervous clumsiness.

“I can’t--” she sustained her objection, but unwilling to listen to any further of it, he grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. “I told you--” she began, but ignoring her, he led her to the centre of the hall, and she had no choice but to comply. “Ser Jaime,” she pleaded with him again, but words were forgotten and so were the others in the room when he took her in his arms, his eyes the only thing she could see and the music the only thing she could hear. Shoving aside her inhibitions, she moved to the tune, recalling the steps, hoping she wouldn’t make a fool of herself with the whole island bearing witness. Going by their example, many other couples followed suit, joining them in a formation.

“I never imagined you to be this graceful, wench,” he observed, his eyes shining with admiration. An accomplished dancer he turned out to be, his feet becoming one with the music not long after they’d settled in.

Before she could respond, the rhythm and the steps took her away from him and in front of a stranger, a handsome nobleman who seemed quite enthusiastic to dance with her. A polite smile, she shared with him, but no words, her mind still with Jaime, aching to get back to him, impatience gnawing her as she switched gracefully from one unknown partner to another.

After what seemed like an eternity, the music returned her to his arms, and she relaxed, relishing the familiarity of his presence and the comforting warmth of his body. “Did I do better than Renly?” he asked, and upon her hesitation in responding, he enslaved her eyes in a fiery gaze. The first round had come to an end and the music died down, but he tightened his hold around her waist, refusing to release her. “Tell me, Brienne,” he insisted, drawing her close to his chest. “I’m not letting you go unless you answer me.”

“You’ll have to stand here all night then,” she whispered, so taken in by his intoxicating eyes that she’d almost forgotten how to breathe.

“I’m ready to do that,” he warned, tilting his face towards hers. “All night and all my life if it’s going to get me answers.”

_Let me go, _she meant to say, _to free herself from his grasp, but when his lips touched hers, she shut her eyes in bliss, losing herself in a world of her own where none but the two of them existed. He backed away after a second, perhaps two, his kiss a gentle breeze that brushed past her, the impact it had on her, though, no less than a tumultuous storm that stirred a variety of sensations in her._
She managed to open her eyes at last. “Why did you do that?” she gasped, struggling to get the words out, the effect of his lips still lingering on hers.

“To show your father that we’re deeply in love,” he explained, tenderly cupping her cheek. “To prove to him that this marriage is no mere alliance or a compromise, but a union of our hearts.”

\[I \textit{love you,}\] she was about to confess, his touch, his lips and every damn thing about him sweeping her mind clean of everything else, but froze when a skeptical inner voice warned, \textit{This isn’t real!}

“I--let me go,” she said, then untangling herself from his embrace, she distanced herself from him, bolting across the hall to busy herself in a conversation with her father.

\textit{Anything to avoid being near him,} she decided, then kept a safe half a hall’s distance from him for the rest of the evening. And when dinner was over, she retired to her chambers, relieved to be away from prying eyes of the horde of people.

The thought of spending the night in his company filled her with a fresh wave of anxiety, and unsure of what to do with the ups and downs of her emotions, she took to getting rid of the gown that had been bothering her for hours. The more she recounted the evening, the more agitated she became, the kiss refusing to leave her in peace, ensnaring her mind and reducing her brain to a useless lump of mass. Frustrated, she tugged at the laces holding her bodice in place, expending more force than they deserved, so much that she risked ruining the delicate silk.

Her laces came undone at last, and she yanked down the sleeves, eager to free her body from this imprisonment. But just as she was about to step out of the gown, the door swung open.

“Brienne,” he called, entering without warning.

“You should’ve knocked,” she barked, pulling up the gown again and clutching the fabric to her chest.

“You should’ve locked the door,” he snapped back in the same tone, then hastily strode towards her.

“Why were you avoiding me?” he demanded.

“I wasn’t,” she lied, hoping he’d leave her in peace and slink away to his side of the bed.

He didn’t argue, but glanced around restlessly, little beads of perspiration materialising on his forehead. “It’s bloody hot in here,” he complained with a strange abruptness, then launched a one-handed attack on his doublet.

“I’m comfortable. You’re--” she faltered, her eyes tracing his fingers which had begun working at double his usual pace, his actions distractingly seductive. “You’re not quite used to this weather, I suppose,” she found him a weak excuse.

He was an epitome of concentration, eyes fixed on his clothes and all his efforts channelled into the complicated task of undressing. Some struggle it took him, but before long, he’d stripped down to his shirt, and a minute or two after that, his magnificent chest lay bare in front of her, gleaming with sweat in all its naked glory. Gulping down her lust, she faced away, hoping he wouldn’t notice the shameless want in her eyes, but before she could realize it, he placed himself squarely and firmly in her path.

“You haven’t answered me,” he resumed from where he’d left off. “Why did you abandon me at the feast?”

“I--” Her head throbbed with the answer, and loud and clear it was, though not one she could

He advanced further, his hand finding her unclad arm. “I told you,” he said, his fingers snaking upwards, burning her from within. “To convince your father.”

“You don’t have to do this,” she said, holding the dress firmly to her breasts. So close they were now, that she could count every grey hair on his beard, every crack on his rough lips, and she feared her hands might slip, uncovering not just her modesty, but also her heart and soul for him to see. “My father’s ill, and while your kind gesture would, no doubt, keep him happy for the rest of his life, I expect no such favour from you—”

He shifted, his face mere inches away from hers. “You think I’m doing you a favour?” he growled, his fingers dropping to her chest, setting afire the familiar ache in her groin. “You think the dance, the kiss—” he exhaled into her face, the faint whiff of wine in his breath clouding her brain “—you think all that was a bloody favour, wench?”

“I do,” she admitted, unable to get over her insecurity.

A miracle, it was, that she could still think coherently, for he now began tracing idle patterns on her chest, his fingers dancing dangerously close to the swell of her breasts. “You’re wrong then,” he clarified, drawing a line along her heart. “The kiss—” he whispered, after a little spell of silence “—was it that bad?” and before she could answer, he went on, “Am I that repulsive? What if Renly had kissed you instead of me?”

Tired, she’d come to be, of the repeated comparison. “Why do you keep bringing up Renly?”

“Because I hate competing with a dead man for your attention, wench,” he confessed, dragging his hand further and further down until it met her fingers and the edges of the silk guarding her modesty. “Wherever I try to gain entry, he’s already there,” he went on, his eyes an odd mix of resentment and possessiveness, “leaving no room for me at all. He has become a firm occupant of your heart, your consciousness, your dreams—”

“It’s not Renly anymore. Hasn’t been for a while,” she banished his misunderstanding, finding the courage, at last, to face the fire in his eyes. “I’ve dreamed of you, Ser Jaime,” she admitted, blushing like the shy maidens she’d grown up with, “ever since you jumped into that pit to save my life, ever since you recited those vows with me.”

His lips parted open, but no further words came.

Before she knew it, he dragged her into an embrace, his eyes engulfing hers in their flames of want. His lips found hers, crushing her, punishing her, and she buckled under the impact, unprepared for the suddenness of the move he’d made on her. His kiss, unlike earlier that evening, was far from chaste, miles away from the show he’d put up for the benefit of her father. A delightful mating game of their mouths, it was proving to be, his lips engaging in a wildly furious dance of passion with hers, throwing her off-guard, knocking down her senses. His tongue seemed to have a mind of its own, clashing with and seeking victory over hers, and she was willing to relent, to be content with her defeat, allowing herself to be consumed by his passion. Helpless, she leaned into him, and he deepened the kiss, sucking and biting and nipping her ruthlessly, determined to leave a mark on her.

A mark that conveyed loudly and clearly that she was his.

Losing control of herself, she sank into him, drowning in him when he delved further into her mouth. Relinquishing her hold on the obstructing dress, she let it drop to the floor, and naked and vulnerable
she now was, a sweaty squirming mess in his arms. Her left hand took to exploring the nape of his neck, and her right was on his chest, her fingers massaging his firm muscles, digging into his flesh and scratching his reddening skin. A throaty growl escaped him, and he pulled her closer, the bulge in his pants making its presence felt against her thighs. Harder, he kissed her, and when she moaned louder, his mouth promptly silenced her, pressing firmly into hers and muffling her cries. Her hand strayed, lingering on every patch of skin she could reach, playing with the coarse patches of his chest hair that had never failed to drive her insane.

“Oh, Jaime,” she gasped softly into his mouth, burying her fingers in his luscious golden mane.

He drew away to meet her eyes. “Jaime, huh,” he observed, then returned to resume his onslaught, biting her lip so hard that she shivered against him, wetness beginning to pool between her legs, scorching her core. He continued to devour her, never tiring, never slowing down, his hand sliding lower and lower, his fingertips teasing her breasts. “It’s not Ser Jaime anymore, is it?” he demanded confirmation, his voice dripping with lust.

All she could do was whimper in response, her mouth locked with his, her whole body shuddering into his when he palmed her breast and tugged at her nipple.

“Tell me, Brienne,” he whispered, releasing her mouth to unleash a stream of fiery kisses down her neck, “do you still think I’m doing you a favour?”

Chapter End Notes

Up Next: The rest of this scene, of course ;) But be warned, this is not the end of the road for them. There's still some way to go, some obstacles to be conquered and some separation to be dealt with before they can finally be together. Rest assured, though, they'll get there before long.

Tentative ETA for the Chapter 23: First weekend of November

EDIT (01-Nov): As I’ve updated in my notes for “I don’t want to go”, there’ll be a few days of delay for this too. Another week or so, possibly, once I’m done with the next chapter of that fic. Thank you for your patience :)

End Notes

Thank you for reading :) Do let me know if you like it!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!