Sapphires
by NightReaderEnigma

Summary

"I will give them what they want. They are all waiting for it. They think I am loyal to Cersei, inseparable from Cersei. I am Kingslayer, Oathbreaker, shit for honour. They can't reconcile what they are seeing with what they have heard of me Brienne. They have no interest in my redemption, to them I deserve no pardon. They will make it be so and they will eliminate anyone who would stand in their way. Of all the things I've done – I cannot be your downfall. I will not. I could never forgive myself." He kissed the top of Brienne's blonde hair. "I would forfeit my life in an instant if I could prevent it."

Jaime contrives a plan to ensure the safety of Brienne in the midst of the turmoil...

The ultimate fix-it fic to negate the heartbreak and reunite our beloved couple.

This works with the episode canon but changes the way it is interpreted, running with and beyond Season 8.

A POV covering of the time omitted between J/B from Season 8 Ep 4, their month in Winterfell, the rest of the series and beyond.

The answer to the questions plaguing our shipper hearts.

Head canon combined with the episodes.

Now completed. :)

Sapphires
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Notes

Herein lies a genuine theory of what could have happened. My first thing published here but my shipper heart needed it! Hugs to all at JB Online :)

I love comments! Feel free to chat to me.
Chill in the Air

Every look was like a dagger. Every breath on borrowed time. Every undertone screamed 'unwelcome'. Jaime has always been attuned to suspicion, especially when it was aimed at him. Being the kingslayer had made him a marked man for people's ire. At first he chided himself in thoughts of paranoia and admonished himself for resembling Cersei. Everyone who isn't us is the enemy. Perhaps this notion was ingrained in the Lannister mindset. But as the days passed the nagging feeling prickled his neck every time he turned his back. They spit on his name. They cursed his presence. Why was he here?

He knew the answer. They had faith in her. Brienne's good name was his ticket to guest right. Once again she had compromised her own position to ensure him kept safely within these walls. Her mind so honest and true she did not pause to question the motives of their reluctant hosts. If her Lady allowed it – all must be well. To her Jaime had proven himself long ago and in the Battle for Winterfell it was clear for all to see. Unshakeable was her faith in his honour and she readily believed in the good of the Starks. Jaime was not so sure. The memories of blood feuds between houses was fused in every brick and stone of Winterfell.

Occasionally he would glance to the grey northern sky (how he loathed this bleak landscape), scanning for a raven. In intermittent silence they arrived and each time Jaime held his breath, uncertain which set of dark wings would tip the scales and see him transported from guest to prisoner. But even now, which one was he really?

He ambled aimlessly around the snow covered grounds. If he dared to bare his steel in the practice yard, others quickly gathered to watch. Half of them came to see the spectacle that was the one handed fighter whilst the others eyed him as an enemy armed within their midst. Whilst the many armies of the living were stationed here it had been tolerable. His presence diluted amongst the influx of foreigners and melee of fighters. With purpose these strange fellows united and therefore it negated the need for close surveillance. But here now – he was out of place. The lone lion amongst the wolves and he felt that the pack was preparing to leap at him with bared fangs.

His Lady Knight was well intentioned. She did not have a mind for politics and whole heartedly considered that those she protected were as honourable as she. Blinded by the vow she had sworn the mother to protect her sweet daughter. But Sansa was not an innocent any more. Nor was she the starry eyed girl swept up in daydreams. No – it was his own blood through Joffrey that had first awoken her from dreams to living nightmares and the steady stream of terrors she had endured had not stopped since.

By what token could Brienne really think that Sansa would shield him long term?

He had questioned her on it of course. Brienne believed in her lady, that Sansa wished for her happiness. That love would be the redeemer. That he had proven it over and over again. As true as that may be for them both – he didn't think for a moment it was true in Sansa's eyes. That her tune could shift from murderous to understanding so easily toward's him. Furthermore the inference it had required....

It was one thing to have your sworn sword pledge that she would fight alongside the besmirched Kingslayer. But it was quite another to take him as her lover and share their sleeping furs each night. Sansa surely saw that it was compromised loyalties. Innocent eyed Brienne had once again tarnished her own reputation for his sake. It made Jaime shudder to think that Sansa Stark would now be questioning the woman who guarded her with her life. Would be looking at Brienne as foolish or worse still, immoral. And even more terrifying was the thought that if he ever overheard
any whispers of the sought he would snap and prove to them all just how terrifying a lion's roar could be.

Then there was Bran. The phantom sitting in the Godswood, a constant reminder of his sins. Daily Bran sat silent, the unspoken looming menacingly between them. Jaime had apologised, but he knew this was piteous little as far as atonement went. The boy lost his legs and his chance at a fulfilling future with it. How in seven hells could the boy actually be content to watch Jaime revel in his new life and love?
The answer was – he wasn't. He couldn't possibly be.

Once the dead had been dealt with and Jaime's days had been relegated to wandering the grounds, he had done nothing but think. Passing the hours until he could join his Lady at the dinner table and they could retire to their chambers together. Over and over again he had turned Bran's words in his mind. What first he had interpreted as fear of the end of days now contained a more sinister note.

'Who said there is an after?'
He had at first presumed that it meant 'for everyone' but now he realised that Bran could have solely meant 'for him.' Surely the boy (who had developed some sought of second sight if the rumours were true) knew that the living would triumph. If so – then this statement was less fear, more threat. It had followed Jaime's apology and asking Bran why he was spared. Was he spared on the provisio that he didn't survive the Long Night?
A one handed knight past his glory days would not have been perceived as standing much of a chance when better warriors had fallen.
But he did survive and why....the answer chilled him to the bone.

Brienne.

Bran couldn't have known of his bond with his wench (the nickname having an even more humorous ring to it these days though she didn't agree). At the council when Bran had repeated 'the things we do for love' he couldn't have known that Brienne was about to intercede, any more than he could have known that she would ensure she and Jaime both saw the dawn again together. The sun had risen on Jaime's future in the wake of the long night but the sun had set on Bran's predicted revenge for his crippling. Now Brienne was an obstacle to the Stark boy and Sansa was doubting both her motivations and her judgment.
It made him feel sick.

Jaime only knew a handful of things were certain:
The Dragon Queen despised him.
His sister had a bounty on his head.
The Stark's mistrusted him and would gladly plot his demise.

He was less guest – more hostage.

And the sum of all fears was that his Lady Knight would be dragged down with him.
Yes, he was living on borrowed time and he just had to think of a way out – for both their sakes.
Jaime sat in the banquet hall waiting. This was the main occupation of his time now – waiting and watching. The past couple of days had done little to assuage his nagging doubts. He longed for more time with Brienne and found that he resented the role she played protecting Sansa. He often watched them from afar, studying the cold expression chiselled in the red head's delicate features, devoid of emotion. She spoke without betraying her thoughts. Every sentence measured and laced with ulterior motive. He had mentioned his observations to Tyrion before he left. Tyrion explained that Sansa was much changed through her experiences and delved no deeper. It seemed everyone around him was consumed by distractions. The looming war proving far more important than considering the company you were keeping. But when you were the loathsome Kingslayer, you would be very unwise to presume your position was comfortable and rest upon your laurels.

He twitched in annoyance at an unbidden thought 'you always were the stupidest Lannister.' Jaime had never declared himself a brilliant intellect but he was far from stupid and of late he had found that it was the supposed 'smart people' who were making the biggest errors in judgment of all.

He couldn't afford such slips – he had so much more to live for now.

Jaime sighed and eyed the two plates sitting in front of him, they were still steaming but it would not take long for the cold to settle over them. He signaled for another wine having already drained his own. After a moment's further thought, he requested water as well just to keep the options open. He chuckled to himself, Brienne was charming when she was in her cups but she had been keen to 'not make a habit of it.'

_Honestly, you get the wench to truly drink once or twice in her life and she is worried it will become a problem?

Jaime on the other hand had developed a much, MUCH higher appreciation of Dornish red of late.

He heard her footsteps approach before he saw her. It was strange how in such a crowded room with so much noise, he could still sense her arrival. She had a certain way, a different gait to other women and he had learnt to find it endearing. Upon his arrival to Winterfell, he had managed to pick out her voice amidst the din of the practice yard. Jaime had become increasingly aware that his entire sensory system was attuned to her and their relationship had only solidified. When they fought the Wights, it was as a unity. As if they were extensions of each other. At the celebratory banquet as he watched her with his little brother, his heart had swollen even more. Everybody had always shown such contempt for Tyrion, when Jaime himself had loved him. The world had always marked him by the stigma of his size. But Brienne had treated him with the same kindness and respect with which she saw everyone. She had even gone so far as to step out of her comfort zone to join in his silly game.

By contrast - Cersei had always been cruel and howling for their younger sibling's blood. Sitting at that table was Jaime's first glimpse of a happy life away from evil. Where they would be a family. The idea that one day Tyrion could be Brienne's little brother too had flitted across his mind and it had made his heart beam. He was sure it had shown to some extent on his face.
“I apologize, I did not mean to leave you waiting so long.” She seated herself opposite him. Her nose was red with cold, her skin pale. She had clearly been outside. Why whatever it was could not have waited for the morning he did not understand. He worried that they took advantage of Brienne's agreeable nature. It was as if she read his mind.

“There was a breach in one of the walls of the food stores. Many places have fallen into disrepair after the Night King's armies but Lady Sansa stresses the importance of supplies in a Northern Winter. The stores were at risk of theft or spoilage so it could not wait.”

Jaime simply nodded and offered her a wine cup. Her blue eyes glanced briefly at it before selecting the water instead. Jaime smiled at her. It was worth a try. He affectionately caressed her hand against the cup. One of the few demonstrative gestures he would allow them in a public arena (he did not trust to put their intimacy on display). Her hand was ice cold to the touch. He frowned. “When does this retchid place get warmer?”

“Jaime.” Brienne scolded. “The Starks have shown us hospitality. It wouldn't do to be overheard insulting their beloved home. Though I know how you feel about the temperature.” He scoffed before reclaiming his hand for his meal. She knew he was just being protective and reassured him.

“A warm meal and I will be righted again.”

Jaime was thrilled to learn that they hadn't lost their banter after becoming lovers. Brienne still disagreed with him frequently and Jaime still did his best to vex her on an hourly basis. Somehow it made it all the more fun. To openly oppose each other and then openly love each other. It was a different kind of relationship and it felt so natural. That fact was going to make the conversation burning at the forefront of his mind incredibly difficult to say. He wanted nothing to disrupt their established happiness. Especially not so soon. But as his observations grew more pertinent the necessity became greater.

His contingency plan had grown into a fully fledged scheme but it would mean nothing if Brienne wasn't complicit in every aspect.

“Will you come riding with me tomorrow?” he asked.

She looked bewildered before responding. “I'm not certain how I could, there is so much that needs doing, especially in the limited daylight hours.”

“Surely they can spare you for an afternoon or - if it is too much to ask - an evening then. Though I'm not keen on going out in the cold.”

“Then why suggest it at all?” There it was. She surely could cut to the chase with him quickly.

“I wish to....”

Eyes and ears were everywhere and even often when you couldn't see them. Who knew how far Bran's detection spanned?

“...spend some time alone with you.”

She flushed slightly. “We are alone every evening.”

Dutiful wench. Why was it such a strain to get her to abandon her responsibilities even temporarily? He didn't want to lie to her but he couldn't tell her the real reason that they needed some distance between them and the Stark forces.

“I am getting a little restless. Come for a ride with me. We will build a fire and just chat for a while. Like the good old days.”

“When we were held captive, dehydrated and half starved?”

“Yes, those were the ones.” He held up his cup in mock toast.

“Now....for some reason, you – who hates the cold – wish to add frozen to that list?”

“Don't question me wench, just agree.” He watched her bristle at the nickname. Too funny.

“I will request leave from Lady Sansa.” Jaime rolled his eyes. “I have asked much of her already Ser Jaime. I am grateful for her understanding.”

“Ah, I hear we are back to titles again.” He tried to change the topic from 'praise be to Sansa'.

“When do you wish to go on this expedition?”

“Tomorrow?” He ventured hopefully.
“That is too soon for me to ask her, it wouldn't be much notice.”

_Precisely! Jaime wanted to say it but held his tongue._

“Just disappear for an hour or two. Winterfell is in such disarray of late we could be gone and back before she even noticed you missing.”
“Her sworn sword which trails her steps is absent and you think she will not notice?”
“You may be her shadow but you are not with her every waking minute. You take time in the practice yard with Pod.”
She looked thoughtful. “I could ask Podrick if we can forgo his training late tomorrow.”
“Yes. Do this for me.” He reached for her hand again.
She studied his face, her blue eyes questioning and clear as she read him. She had a knack for peering into his soul and it was this skill he earnestly hoped she was using.
“Alright.” She acquiesced.
“No need to tell....” He glanced in Sansa's direction at the main table.
“I will speak with Podrick.” She promised in return.
Jaime encouraged his horse along as it hesitantly weaved amongst the trees. The snow covered branches and frost bitten ground a treacherous jaunt for his Southron mount. He had considered making use of one of the castle horses but decided he did not want to be indebted to the Starks any further than he already was. He had preplanned their destination, a wise move considering they were negotiating the trail in half light. Finding the perfect location for their chat had been another mission to occupy his time. He wanted to ensure absolute privacy.

Rugged up against the cold and armed with kindling, they would start a fire as soon as they reached the clearing. Jaime had prepared the wood and site in advance. They had ridden in silence, Jaime carefully fine tuning the conversation that lay ahead. Now and then he would hear a huff of annoyance from the rider behind him, Brienne continued to be perplexed by the ambiguity of this mission.

“What is this in aid of?” She enquired again. Her tone taking on more force.

“Shush, remember patience wench? It is considered a virtue. We are nearly there.”

He kicked his horse to a small burst of speed as he recognised the final stretch to the clearing. It caught Brienne off guard and he was already dismounting by the time she caught up. Sliding off her horse she watched him suspiciously as he struggled to light the fire one handed. Another huff of annoyance saw her seize it from him and ignite the wood with ease. Jaime scanned the perimeter, studying every tree in the glow of the flames. He was looking for ravens and was pleased when he did not spy one. Nonetheless, they would keep their voices low.

“How can I know the meaning behind all of this? I very much doubt it was just for your own amusement, though I wouldn't put it past you.”

Jaime nodded. “Come sit with me.”

He laid a spare fur he had brought with him upon a nearby stone. It would prove large enough for them to sit side by side and was another asset of the location.

She settled beside him and fixed him with her blue gaze, waiting for him to divulge.

He took a deep breath. “It is difficult to know where to start.”

“You have been quiet. It's very unlike you. I knew there must be something plaguing your mind. What is it?”

He heard the edge of fear in her tone. The self doubt creeping in. Of course she would instantly assume that the problem was her. He took her gloved hand in his own and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“Brienne – the Starks don't want me here.”

“How can you say that? They absolved you at trial and have given you leave to stay in their ancestral home...”

He inhaled sharply. “Please, I need you to listen to me. For once.” He smiled at her. “I know you are pig headed stubborn and I have always found that admirable - if not annoying. But you are also preoccupied and you have been in the North among their people for far longer than me.”

“Should that not mean I know them better?”

“Perhaps, however can't that also mean you are blinded? You are not a Lannister, Brienne. You have never been their enemy.”
He smirked at his own irony. Talking to a lover to whom he was not related? How his times had changed.

“Let's say – you are right and I have no cause for concern. Then all is well and you needn't be bothered. But let's also consider, for the sake of argument, that I am right.”

He sighed. “It would be incredibly foolish to not have a plan in place and I cannot rest easy without one.”

“That is fair.” She pursed her lips measuring the weight of his words. “You are so very determined that Lady Sansa's hospitality towards you is not what is seems. Why?”

“It's not just her. It is also Bran. I flung the boy out a window for god's sake! He has every right to plot my demise and mark me as irredeemable.”

“Yet he hasn't.”

“Exactly. I am waiting for the coin to flip. For the other side of the wolves to show. It is unnatural Brienne. Do you see the coldness in Sansa's eyes? Especially when she looks at me?”

“I have seen it.” Brienne conceded. “Your family's have bad blood. It is difficult to erase.”

“And tell me this, because it scares me more than I care to admit.....has she changed towards you?”

Brienne looked off into the woods, deep in thought, before meeting his eyes again.

“I will not deny I had detected a distancing of sorts. But why would she grant my request to keep you here?”

“I'm valuable. She is more calculating than you give her credit for.”

His Lady Knight was silent. Jaime checked the trees again for the dark eyes of Brandon Stark's messengers. She watched him intently, realisation dawning on her of just how seriously he took this threat. “What are you thinking that she...they...could do with you?”

“Any number of things. They say guest, they mean prisoner. I am powerless here Brienne and it's not just me I'm afraid for. It's you as well.”

“You fear for me? Why?”

He gave her a pointed look. “When the Dragon Queen has seized the throne and outed the Lannister House, do you honestly think she will be content to have the man who slew her father sitting in the North playing house? Or will she ask for me. Request my head on a pike.”

“She let you go.”

“Barely and it wasn't on her say so. She was just outvoted by Starks.”

“See? The Starks are your allies now.”

“Sansa and the Targaryen Queen are already at odds. I do not think for one moment she would compromise her position further by denying her a prisoner, whom she personally despises I might add, from within her own keep. Even if she did decide to shield me – for you – all it would take is a word from Bran. A revelation of the truth and all would hastily unravel. Jon sides irrefutably with the Queen.”

“What about Tyrion? He is Lannister and he serves as the Queen's hand.”

“His position is already slipping, surely you could see that.” He shook his head. “I fear for my brother but I have enough on my mind already.”

Jaime knew his next question was frightening. “Then where does this all leave you? Will you stand aside whilst they take my head for your oath and honour or will you fight and lose your head along with mine?”

“Don't Jaime. That is too terrifying a thought.”

“It could be reality. So very easily it could.” He gripped her hand tighter.

“Our relationship made us stronger against the Night's King and his armies of the undead but in this game of political intrigue it makes us weak. It leave us vulnerable.” He exhaled the next sentence. “We have always been on opposing sides in this war.”

Jaime squeezed his eyes tight. He couldn't stand to watch the bitter awareness flood her as he said this next sentence.
“I say this not with malice because it is not how I think... but you hold little to no value for the Dragon Queen. You are just a solider. A sworn sword to the Lady of Winterfell whom herself questions the Queen's authority at every turn."
He opened his eyes again so she could read his earnestness. "But as leverage against me? Then you become valuable. Our closeness has left us open Brienne. And they all know about us. What we mean to each other. They all saw it. You stood up for me."
"I can take care of myself."
"Even in the worst case scenario which a mere moment ago you didn't even want to think about? You can't say it is impossible Brienne when you know it is in fact, highly probable."
"Queen Daenerys has yet to claim the Iron Throne."
"Well that just presents another set of concerns for us doesn't it? It was not so long ago that an assassin waltzed in to Winterfell to prove just how little my life is worth to my own sweet sister."
His tone dripped with irony. "I could only be thankful it was Bronn. Next time we may not be so lucky."
"I cannot believe she sent a bounty hunter after you." His lady was of such innocent mind. She seemed genuinely shocked.
"I can. I know her...or at least I thought I did. She is scorned."
"Does she have no affection for you at all? Even as a brother?"

Jaime hesitated whilst he took a long deep breath. "Cersei is...complicated to say the least. And I – am not blameless either."
This gave Brienne pause. "What is it that you have not told me Ser Jaime?"
A lead weight clamped around his heart.
An iron bear trap snaring his misdeeds.

He had always felt alleviated of his numerous wrong doings when he confessed them to his wench but he was very unsure how she would process this one. Or the subsequent realisation that he hadn't come clean sooner.

“Cersei....is....” The scrutiny of her blue gaze was crushing him.
All her honour and judgment transmitted into their wordless intensity.
He instantly regretted raising the topic but knew there was no going back now. “.....Pregnant.”

Jaime could have sworn she physically jolted.
She hurtled from her position on the rock quicker than a dragon into flight, her hand wrenched violently from his.
“You tell me this – NOW.” Her voice was angry but not raised.
She did not need to yell. Her outrage radiated off her in waves.
“You have known this whole time.” It wasn't a question but an accusation.

Jaime nodded weakly.
“Is it yours?” She proceeded with caution. He watched as her iron sheilds went up, protecting herself from the information to come.
“Yes. I am lead to believe so.” He huffed. “With Cersei I never could actually tell you without a shadow of a doubt.”
“Yet you left her?”
He rose from the stone to stand before her. “A wise person once told me that this wasn't a matter of loyalty. That it went beyond houses and honour and oaths.”
“That person, as we now hear, only had half the story.”
“A war between the living and the dead. The end game of all survival. Would it really have made that much of a difference? Cersei was willing to condemn herself and her child to the mercy of an undead army rather than compromise her position of power. It clearly shows where her priorities lie.”
“And you?” Her tone was skeptical.
“I argued with her. I disagreed. I pushed until she threatened my life. She made it abundantly clear that this child made me superfluous.
I became disposable to her in that moment and I saw her in full colour for the first true time.
I headed North.
For the fight.
For redemption.
To do what is honourable and right.....
For you."

The next part he added in a whisper.
“Which I believe she knows.”

Brienne's mouth was set in a firm line. It was hard to tell what she was thinking.
She paced a small tread of earth, leaving deep imprints in the snow.
He waited for her to speak.

“I cannot decide if what you just told me is the most despicable or the most noble act I have heard tumble from your mouth.”
“Trust me Brienne. I have done worse.” The look she gave him in response could freeze quicker than the icy breath of resurrected Viserion.
“You talk to me of concerns over my divided loyalties but now I find that you left more than a dysfunctional relationship in King's Landing.”
She finally exhaled. “Jaime both are your flesh and blood.”
She shook her head, unable to comprehend what she was hearing.
“What family can abandon and connive against their own kin?”
“Lannisters.” Jaime answered plainly. “And you forgot 'breed with.'”
“How long ago?” There it was. The slightest hint of female sensitivity.
It gave him a smug sense of reassurance. She still cared even after what he'd just told her.
“Ages.” He crossed over to her, trudging through the snow. “Cersei and I hadn't even been getting along that well.”
“Evidence would suggest you were agreeable in some capacity.”
“Would it now?” He smiled and raised a gloved hand to her cheek. “Because you and I always see eye to eye.”
He looked deeply into her blue spheres, so she could read his soul as he spoke. “I made my choice.”

“I'm not going to say that this revelation doesn't trouble me deeply Ser Jaime.”
“Fair enough. But can we come back to it? There was a point I was trying to make.”
“And what was that?”
“The fact that as it stands. Pregnancy or not. I am here in the North with you. And Cersei, spurned and outraged wants me dead.”
“Would she really wish death upon her brother. Or....” This was clearly hard for her to say. “The father of her baby?”
“I can never be sure. She had some machinations in place with Euron Greyjoy behind my back. She warned me that nobody walks away from her and that is precisely what I did.”
He shrugged. “Next thing I hear, Bronn is sent to kill me. Seems pretty definitive doesn't it?”
Jaime strolled back to the rock and sat down. “But once again, it is not myself I fear for. As you just pointed out, murderous intent aside, Cersei does have an invested interest in me.”
“What is your concern Ser Jaime?”
Her blatant insistence on using his title was hammering home how displeased she was at this point in time.
Each utterance twisted like a barb in his gut, erecting fences between them which they had both taken great pains to rip down.
However, it was still an improvement on Kingslayer.

“You.” His Lady Knight's puzzlement was endearing.
She could not for one moment be so conceited as to predict his next phrase.
“You are a threat to her.”
Brienne was indignant. “How could I possibly be a threat?”
He rose again swiftly and seized Brienne in his arms, nose to nose with her he breathed.
“You know why wench.”
“It seems very unlikely.”
“But it's real. And you know it. You can feel it.” He squeezed her arm with his left hand and wrapped the other around her back pulling her close.
“She saw our looks at the Dragonpit. She heard you address me publicly. Witnessed our familiarity as you grabbed my arm.” Jaime studied her expression to make sure she was absorbing his words.
“I watched the rage creep over her face as I repeated the same moral sentiment to her as you did to me. Cersei knows - that you, Brienne of Tarth, have a hold of me. An influence over me that has now surpassed what was previously an all consuming grip of sexual partners and twins.
She knows that I chose you.”
He released her and she took an unsteady step back. “And now Bronn is armed with the knowledge that we are lovers.”

“How did Ser Bronn discover our....” She was still so shy. “...Intimacies?”
“He overheard me speaking with Tyrion.”
“What exactly were you discussing with Tyrion?!”
“Never mind, we were sharing wine and having a brotherly talk.” She had turned a delightful shade of red.
“Fear not my Lady. I did not disclose anything that would bring you shame. I protect what we have and hold it most dear. You have my word on that.” Jaime shook his head to clear his thoughts. They were getting off track. “There was a point in my mentioning his involvement - the danger of Cersei discovering us just became even more pressing. If she had wicked intent towards me before can you imagine the extent of her anger once she knows that I have left her behind me for good and moved on? With you.”

Brienne mulled this over with far more seriousness than he had anticipated.
He thought for sure she would fight him on it.
That her insecurities would compel her to argue against the notion. Instead she looked somewhat guilty.
This took him completely by surprise.

“There is something I have not disclosed to you either Ser Jaime.”

Now he was incredulous.
His honest woman had been concealing something from him?
Surely it was to be expected that he would have skeletons in his closet - but Brienne he could read like a book.
“What is it?”

“I have not told you this. I never would have dreamed that I’d find myself in a position where I could consider admitting this to you.”
“Why ever not?”
“Ridicule, embarrassment....mortification in general I suppose.” He winced at her admission. He could be a terrible tease and knew his words could be razors. But now when he looked back he shuddered to think that any of his taunts could have caused serious harm to his then maiden.
“How long have you been sitting on this?”
“A considerable amount of time.”
“When? Where? I can't possibly think what it could be that has an impact on what we're discussing now.”
“But it does..." A resigned sigh. "It happened at Joffrey's wedding."
He mentally wound back the timeline in his mind to that fateful day. They had not long returned to King's Landing.....

“You spoke with Cersei.”

Tower bells of alarm sounded in his head. He recalled turning around to see them speaking. Even back then it had sent shivers down his spine for reasons he would not fathom until much later.

“What did she say?” He knew his twin well enough to know how vile she could be. If his words cut, hers sliced and then festered.

“She was quite civil. I have been treated worse before. It was just this – statement of hers. Almost like an accusation if you will. It came out of the blue. I could already tell she was quite, possessive of you. But I didn't anticipate.....”

“Brienne – what did she say to you?” He could tell she was flustered by the memory.

“She....” Brienne had gone from pink to crimson. “Stated very plainly that.....”

“Tell me exactly what she said. I will recognise Cersei's words. I know how she speaks. But tell me precisely Brienne.”

“She thanked me for returning you to her. I let her know that we saved each other. This look crossed her face -”

Brienne's face contorted at that memory. "She just fixated on me as she said, 'and you love him.'"

Not in a thousand lifetimes could he have expected that. Scheming woman! She had called out Brienne so easily. Cersei, calculating with a mind for intrigue versus Brienne guileless and sincere.

His sister had seen through her in an instant. He didn't know what bothered him more – that Cersei had seen Brienne's affections before he had or that he was still so blind to both of the women in his life.

Jaime had no idea Brienne had cared for him for so long and was clueless that Cersei would have marked his wench as an enemy from such early days. What he had seen of their exchange had been enough to convince him that Brienne needed to escape the sinister clutches of life at court and afterwards he had soon sent her on a mission with Oathkeeper.

He did wonder what else he would have done differently if this information had come to light sooner.

Instead he just nodded. “You realise this raises the stakes? Makes our situation more dire?”

“I hadn't considered the greater implications of it at the time. I never thought that we.....” She trailed off.

Jaime knew what she was thinking. He sat back down upon the furs and patted the rock beside him for her to join.

“Come wench, we have much to discuss.”

She sank heavily onto the stone surface. Brienne's stubborn denial dissolved and her entire demeanour became pensive.

He voiced their shared thoughts. “If the Dragon Queen wins – we're doomed. If Cersei wins – we will never be safe.”

“Then what are we to do?” She enquired.

“That,” he picked up her hand again to resume where they left off pre-confessional. “Is what we are out here to talk about.”

She nodded absently, her mind already far away. He hated that he had brought this strife to her world.

In these times he was reminded how much younger than him she was and how uncorrupted by comparison. He wanted to plough on, divulge his plans and continue their forward momentum of revelation.

But Brienne was methodical, rational and naïve. She needed time to process.
He leaned across to place a gentle kiss on her temple as they slipped into a comfortable silence. They had the time, he owed it to her to take this at her pace.
Subterfuge

Chapter Summary

Necessity is the mother of all invention when it comes to schemes...

Chapter Notes

I have faith in Ser Jaime.
I know that he loves Brienne.
In his true nature I trust - everything else is smoke and mirrors.

The light had receded to no more than a distant glow on the obscured horizon.
The trees loomed ominously casting lengthy shadows as the woods around them took on a different form in the night.
To think this was where the dead things roamed was not as much of a stretch as it had seemed in the South.
Those who dwelt here were long familiar with a Winter night's eerie quality. Had everyone in the Crownlands been exposed to this desolate frozen wasteland, they too would have found it believable and much effort and life would have been spared.

Jaime added another log to the fire whilst Brienne fetched a second cloak to wrap around their shoulders.
They had been out for longer than she had expected but Jaime by contrast had been prepared for a lengthy excursion. He had packed a handful of supplies, anticipating they would miss dinner back at the castle but Brienne refused the offer of food, stating that all their discussions had left her stomach uneasy. Ignoring the wench's protests, he went about warming wine over the fire. Perhaps it would tempt her once it was done and the temperature plummetted after dark.

“What now Ser Jaime?” Her dour tone broke the silence and he turned from the fire to face her. She was back in the moment with him, ready to talk, her eyes bright and alert in the glow of the flames. “You have convinced me that my allies are enemies. That your pregnant -” (she emphasized that word a little more than he would have liked), “-sister would paint a target on my back. That the Dragon Queen will weaponise our attachment and our position in general is precarious at best.”
A sombre shake of her head. “What can be done to right this? There is nowhere we can turn and no allegiance we can truly trust.”

“Exactly. Here and now we only have each other. Anyone else must be doubted no matter our faith in their character.”
The words made him cringe but they rang with truth. It would seem life as a Lannister had a sinister theme. “There must be exceptions though surely....” and life as a Tarth had eternal optimism. “....Podrick has never given me cause to doubt.”
“You can't include Podrick in my plan.”
“He is a good lad....”
“No.” He was firm. “I mean it Brienne. This is serious. I would not trust Tyrion with this either. The more people that know, the more we are risking, both for ourselves and for them.”

He sighed. “I know you are new to this world of political skirmish but us Lannisters are old hat. You are duelling against the best game players in the Seven Kingdoms. You know they are the masters, as they’re the ones still alive. The power houses of deception and treachery. Cersei, Tyrion, Sansa, Varys, the Dragon Queen. They have been playing this game a long time. Before I tell you what I propose, I will need your word that, come what may, you will never discuss it with anyone else. Ever.”

She looked crushed. Jaime let out an exasperated sigh.

His voice became more gentle. “I am not the best at this either wench, far from it. I have worked long and hard twisting this situation every which way I can. Trying to find an alternative way out of this. I can only find one avenue. One foreseeable future for the two of us. But before I include you, I need your complete cooperation. Without your dedication, it will not work. You must promise me you will do exactly as I instruct for both our sakes. Though I must insist that my primary priority is protecting you.”

“Even though its not yet evident that I am in any immediate danger?”

“Trust me. You will be. It is only a matter of time.”

Resignation settled over her. “Why must we always find ourselves at crossed paths?”

“Because you literally got into bed with the Lannisters and it comes with the territory.” Jaime smirked, trying to lighten the mood.

She was predictably unimpressed.

“You could always just change your mind.” He continued on unfazed. “Side with them. Kill me. For your oath or loyalty - or in the name of one of those unrealistic ideals which you hold to so steadfastly. For all I know you seduced me to gain my trust and are feeding information back to the Starks.” Jaime spat out the final sentence amidst bursts of laughter. His Lady Knight was so honourable it was positively unthinkable.

He watched her intently for a reaction.

He hadn't seen this particular expression grace her features since he questioned whether Tormund had grown on her.

In the same manner she ignored his suggestion and continued down a path of her own.

“I will not make any promises until I know what it is I am agreeing to. Then we will talk it over together and only when I am satisfied will I give you my word.”

A tempting innuendo seizing upon the word 'satisfied' blazed through his mind but he snapped his mouth shut before it found purchase.

Best keep the wench on side and not push her too far.

“Alright.” Jaime accepted her terms and began. “Do you recall when we were travelling in the Riverlands and I tried to convince those Stark men I was from Ashemark?”

“Yes. I believe you claimed you stole a pig. I said I was taking you to Riverrun for Tully justice. They recognised you anyway. What of it? I can't see how it relates.”

“The issue in that scenario was not the charade itself – that part worked brilliantly. It was my face which gave us away. Our quick thinking in that situation gave me inspiration. Because the circumstances were similar. We were isolated from both sides, alone, without immediate allies and having to lie our way out together. This is exactly what I am suggesting now.”

“You think forging a chain of lies is the answer?” Puzzled disbelief. “Have you never heard that the truth will set you free?”

“How is that working out for us so far wench?”

“We are both alive. Thanks to the Stark's belief in the integrity of my word. Now you want me to fall into a pit of deceit?”

“Yes.” Jaime did not flinch. “Truth only bought us time. Honesty worked for you as they had no
reason to doubt your allegiance but it isn't enough to erase my entire lifetime's worth of betrayal and damnation. People find it far easier to expect the worst from me. I'm the problem Brienne. I'm the reason you are in this situation. We have told the truth – time and time again. Yet they are not believing. I have done terrible things. They are waiting with bated breath for me to commit another treason.”

“You weren't exactly contrite at your trial. But you are honest. At least until you are playing your role of villain.”

“Well done.” He smiled. “You know me better than anyone. Even Cersei has never been able to see through my facade. How do you think we took the Riverlands without war?”

“I'm not sure I want to know.”

“Many times I have used this tactic, relying upon my diabolical reputation....”

“Which isn't true.”

“...and many times it has worked.”

“Not in the case of man from Ashemark.”

“We weren't prepared.” Jaime knew the example that would convince her. “Sapphires was more successful.”

She glanced furtively at where his right hand had been, concern etched across her face.

He shrugged slightly. “I still count it as a win.”

Brienne was distant, her memory calling back horrors of another time. Together.

When she spoke, her tone was soft. “Many times I feared that you'd regret it. I waited for a comment to the extent. Some snide inference to let me know I wasn't worth it.....it never came.”

She gave him that look. The one only she was capable of. Admiration, respect, faith in his character. Somewhere along their road it had replaced her judgment. In recent times an even warmer emotion had filled it.

His chest swelled. He never wanted to see that conviction dampen. He vowed he would give her no cause to doubt.

“In truth the thought never even crossed my mind.” A genuine declaration from his heart.

Of all the vile atrocities his brain had conjured up through the years (babies in catapults being a particular highlight), not once had he ever questioned the trade off.

Even if his life had been his hand, his wench had always been worth it. The reward outweighed the cost. Gods. He had cared immensely about her for a lot longer than he realised.

“You cannot say that your scheme came without its price.” She was always the voice of reason.

“That's a risk we are going to have to take. And it will be mine to pay if it comes to it. I want to remove the danger from you.”

“How will you do it?”

“If push comes to shove, I will give them what they want.”

She looked confused.

Jaime bade himself inhale and exhale. He needed to forge steel around his emotions so he could relay the plan.

“If it is a traitor they expect, then a traitor I will be.”

“Jaime, no!”

“Hear me out! They are all waiting for it. They think I am loyal to Cersei, inseparable from Cersei. I am Kingslayer, Oathbreaker, shit for honour. They can't reconcile what they are seeing with what they have heard of me Brienne. They have no interest in my redemption, to them I deserve no pardon. They will make it be so and they will eliminate anyone who would stand in their way.”
Her blue eyes were glassy. He felt himself quivering.
He bundled Brienne tightly in his arms, the spare cloak draped around both their shoulders. It was inelegant with her being taller then he, but he needed to hold her. Feel her near.
He whispered to her, “Of all the things I've done – I cannot be your downfall. I will not. I could never forgive myself.”
Jaime kissed the top of her blonde hair. “I would forfeit my life in an instant if I could prevent it.”

She pulled back to look up at him. “No.”
“For once in your life don't be stubborn. You are the reason I am still alive. I will return the favour.”
“And what meaningless life am I to lead without you in it?” Her voice was thick with emotion. Jaime realised he had never meant this much to anyone. Not even Cersei. His self loathing often made him wonder why the gods thought he deserved to share his life with the Knight who sat before him.
The essence of a good woman.
But the crux of their situation lay in that the fates did not smile on them.
They were constantly pushed apart by the ebb and flow of an insidious tide. A never ending current of separation and despair.
This time their division was likely permanent. Compounded by the finality of a death – his.
Jaime responded in the only way he knew how.

“The honourable one you were always meant to lead. You are the first female Knight of the Seven Kingdoms yet you hitched your heart to a sinking ship.” He cradled her cheek in his left hand. “My honour resides in you Brienne. My worth reflected in your eyes alone. You will carry with you, the light of my few noble deeds, long after my flame is extinguished. In this I rely.”

Her bottom lip trembled but she composed herself. “What must be done?”
“We will figure out our respective roles together. If we are to play this part we must be convincing. Everyone must believe I am severed from you.”
“And then?”
“I travel South. I disappear one way or another....” Time to deliver another blow. “The only way this ends is with my death.”

She stiffened. An unnatural cold seeped into both their bodies far more freezing than the elements to which they were currently exposed.
Ice ran in their veins.
“I am not saying I must die, although it is highly likely in the process I will. But to the entire Seven Kingdoms – from the coldest peaks of the North to the far reaches of the Dornish coastline – Jaime Lannister, for all intensive purposes, must be dead.”
“How will you possibly make that happen without it becoming a reality?” She was aghast and ever obstinate. He watched her shaking her head, refusing to accept what she was hearing.
“I will have to figure that out as I go. All I know is I can't make it happen here. It will have to be in the Battle for King's Landing. That's where all the action is. The most obvious place for me to get caught in the crossfire.”
“Only you will actually get caught in the crossfire! Jaime this is suicide!”
“So be it. It must be done! Don't you see...? Don't ask me to endanger you further! I must put it to rights.
I must be gone, my infamy erased so we can start again.” He huffed. “Or at least you can.”

“How if you are dead to the world will we find each other again? I am loyal to the Starks and you, no matter the outcome, will be gone without a trace.”
“I didn't say I had finalised every detail. That's more Tyrion's speciality.”
Brienne rose and paced. 
He could picture the thousands of scenarios running through her mind, each more unpleasant than the previous. 
His Lady Knight stopped suddenly in her tracks. “Tarth.”
She whirled around to face him. “Go to my father.”
Jaime stared blankly at her.
“The Evenstar does not know me Brienne and even if he did – if he is half as pigheaded judgmental as you were in the beginning he would return my head to Kings Landing on a plate.”
“Talk to him. Convince him. Say that I sent you.”
“You expect him to listen? I know you wench and you had to get your infuriating ways from somewhere.”
“The location is perfect. My island has stayed out of the better part of these wars. It is not too far from the Crownlands.”
“I know. I have seen it.”
“You have?”
“On my way to Dorne. It captivated me before I even knew what I was looking at. I suspected of course.
Its Sapphire blue waters, its tranquility. It reminded me of you.”

Brienne visibly swallowed. “You have to come back to me Jaime. We are united now.... we were strong as individuals before but things have changed. I don't know....” She was awkward as she stumbled and tripped over her own phrases. “When you glimpse a life you never dared to dream...I had resigned myself to my reality....but I feel differently now.”
“I understand. I feel it too.” He gazed off into the night, trying to gather his ragged thoughts. “How are we going to convince Lord Selwyn?”
Brienne pursed her lips in contemplation. “Nothing is more hateful than failing to protect the one you love – it has been a creed of mine.
It seems rather poignant in this conversation but it has more bearing. The motto belonged to my mother. It is one of the few things I know about her. Where it originated from I cannot say. She embroidered it once in a tapestry. It hangs in an alcove of the library at Evenfall Hall. It had a profound effect on me as a child. It instilled a sense of responsibility. It made me want to be resilient, a fighter. So that if ever there came a time when I had to defend a loved one, I could.”
She exhaled slowly. “Very few people would know it as her trademark – and mine....”

“But your father would recognise it.” He smiled catching on.
“It may be enough to persuade him that I sent you.”
“Well played wench.”
“You are right about him though. He will not be swayed easily from his preconceived ideas or his sense of justice. Even with my mother's words. He never liked to talk about her. I always got the sense it hurt too much.”
“So it will strike a cord as well.”
“If he fails to protect someone I care for....” She shuddered. “It's worth a try. But I haven't been back for a long time. I can't know how the years have hardened him. I know I must be – quite the disappointment.”
“Far from it, if he asks me.”
“He won't.” A sad silence consumed them.

“Once your plan is put it place, will it be on Tarth when we see each other again?”
Jaime tried to smile, the reassurance falling short. “I certainly hope so My Lady Knight. But it may take a long time.”

Brienne collapsed defeatedly back on their stone, emotionally drained. “How long?”

“That would be in your hands. I trust you to use your head and not your heart. To think first and assess the status quo. If we go through all this danger and personal sacrifice we must be certain it is worthwhile and final. You have to be sure, beyond the shadow of a doubt that there is no suspicion of us. We cannot send a single raven. Not to forewarn your father. Not to let you know if I still live. Nothing. We will both be moving forward blindly. Anything out of the ordinary could arouse unwanted attention.”

She looked stricken as she lay her head in her hands. “I will have no word? No contact? For an indefinite amount of time?”
“Yes. Until the dust settles. Until you can get away. Safely.
I imagine it will take awhile for Westeros to find peace. To accept their new sovereign and to form councils. During this time, as far as you know, I am dead. Gone. And it very well may be the truth.”
“Can we contrive a method? A way to get word to me....”
“When was the last time you received word from anyone wench? You know it would be foolhardy. I trust you to come when the time is right.”
“And if I arrive to discover you are long gone? Lost to me. That the rumours of death were true and I had been clinging to false hope?”
“Know the reason why. Keep it in your heart. This was my choice and I will not regret a moment of it if I die knowing you are safe.”
“Can we not just stay here....perhaps we are wrong about everything.”

Jaime stood in front of her, taking her hands from her face. He gave one a tight squeeze. “You are the single most innocent person I have ever met. You are so willing to see the good in people. But don't be blindsided. Don't let your wishful thinking cloud our window of opportunity. We must seize upon it, before it closes for us forever.”

He crouched down to her eye level. “A chance in a million, a shot in the dark. It is better odds for us than not trying at all. If you could see the future I plan for us.... in a warm place, away from wolves, lions and dragons intent on tearing us to pieces, you would risk all to see it happen too.”
“I will be risking all – I am gambling with you. There is nothing I care about more.”

Jaime nodded, glowing at her sentiment. He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles.

“Do I have your word now? Are you in this with me?”
“I have one condition. I would ask you to wait. I need one final assurance this isn't our imaginings.”

Jaime sighed and stood back up. It felt as though they had come full circle and he was back at the beginning.
She truly could be infuriatingly stubborn. Brienne clasped his forearms. “Look at me....” The pressure of her firm grip prompted him encouragingly. “Don't be frustrated with me Jaime. I do believe you. I see the logic behind everything you have said. But we will be risking everything! I need to know for sure. Up until this point in time the Starks have never given us direct cause for concern. My eyes are open now – I will watch for it.”
He let out another loud exhale, frustration taking hold. She leaned into his line of vision, so he could not avoid her steady blue gaze as she continued.
“We will watch, together....for even the smallest sign. One is all I need Jaime. Then we will put your plan into action.
Can we not savour what we have in the meanwhile? Cherish every moment?
If no sign comes, our concern was unfounded. If it does then...” Sadness took hold of her. He could see it. “....at least we will be prepared to act.”
Jaime knew she was just trying to postpone the inevitable. But he wasn't quite ready to part with his wench yet. They had waited years to be together. Her terms were fair.

“Alright My Lady Knight. If you agree to work on the ploy with me while we wait. We still have to figure out the finer details. Our performance has to be perfect. When the moment comes, it will be a hard thing to do. For both of us.”
She nodded. “So we are in agreement Ser Jaime.” This time she used his title out of sincerity and respect. “You have my word.”
“And you have mine.” He replied.

Brienne stood and slipped into his arms. They embraced tightly as he whispered in her ear. “This oath I intend to keep.”
“My sword would appreciate that from its namesake. Whenever I wear it, I think of you.” Her breath was warm on his cheek.
Jaime simply smiled, enjoying her nearness. A brief harmonious respite before the world came crashing in on them. Then a realisation dawned on him...

“Wench – I forgot one element. We will need a way to action the scheme. Once it becomes dire we will not be able to discuss our plan in any form within the castle walls. That's why we will be organised ahead of time.”
“Mmmmm.” She was listening but had run out of words. Leaning in to him, for the first time in their shared history, she was willing to let him take the reigns.
“I decree.” His voice carried a lilt. “A codeword. When it is said by one of us, the plan is put into irreversible action.”
“And what word do you propose?”
“One that has worked for us before. A token of good fortune.”

He kissed her temple. “It will be 'Sapphires.'"
In their chambers late that night their ardor was fervent. Both driven by a desperate need to embody the other. Their shared heartache, longing and yearning manifesting itself in a physical force of passion. So many words had been spoken, a massive weight had descended upon their shoulders. The time for turning a blind eye and reveling in the newness of their romantic bond slowly coming to an end. Replaced by a more consuming closeness. A rapport of more than friendly banter and perfect synchrony when duelling. The consummation of their relationship had been a monumental leap into the unknown for both of them, but it had resulted in more substantial beauty than Jaime had ever imagined possible. They were warriors, they were survivors, they belonged to each other. In every sense they cemented their union and found completeness. Rapture such as this could not be for naught. They would weather this storm, each anchoring themselves to the distant spectre of the other and working towards a common goal – reuniting. Out of sight would never mean out of mind. He kissed his wench with abandon, willing away the angst to enjoy their moment. The memories they were currently creating, were the very same ones they would need to cling to on the long lonely road ahead of them.

* * *

Rest eluded Jaime. He lay awake in the soothing warmth of their sleeping furs, staring into the dim firelit room. Despite feeling physically spent, his brain refused to settle. Intent on running through everything discussed during the day in repetitive loops. Brienne's own sleep was fitful. Her body wracked with tension. He knew unwanted images flit through her subconscious mind. Their eventual separation. A plethora of grisly deaths. His own uncomfortable revelations....

Unbidden reminders of he and his sister tangled in a lovers embrace. The sordid nature of his past was inescapable and now it had disappointingly found a way to their bed. He wished he could summon the right words to make her understand. That until he had known the difference - experienced genuine connection with a woman of his own choosing – he had never been able to gain a perspective of just how twisted their incestuous coupling had been.

His romantic history was as gnarly and wild as the Weirwood roots which stretched grotesquely across the Northern Godswoods. Unsightly and horrible for outsiders to look upon. A gruesome spectacle they could never hope to comprehend. But for the Northerners who knew no different, it was part of life and they could never see it any other way. So too had it been for Jaime and Cersei.
Some corners of his mind, now isolated from his immediate heart felt genuine concern for Cersei’s fate.
Bounty on his head or not (that was just par for the course when it came to his twin). A victim of her own nature, he had witnessed her penchant for cruelty since childhood. Why had he always been so keen to overlook it? To excuse it away?
Love is truly blind as they said. But within this came the conundrum. . .

His brotherly instinct remained whilst his romantic interests resided elsewhere. He knew Cersei could never accept that. Brienne was correct when she had called it possession. Jaime was property to Cersei. She expected to own him body, mind and soul and he had always allowed it. She was not a woman to be reasoned with. To settle for explanations relating to epiphanies and moral awakenings. To accept that her Jaime Lannister had found love with another. Especially another she would consider vastly inferior to herself. She would take it as a direct insult and slight – instantly diminishing his feelings and assuming it were no more than revenge on Jaime's part. Cersei's perspective of human worth had only ever been skin deep and he knew no matter now firmly he may protest she would never accept Brienne's many merits.

Women like Brienne had no place in Cersei's shallow superficial world and likewise, the callous malevolent motivations of Cersei's inner circle were not something he wanted Brienne's kindness exposed to.
What silliness had invaded his thinking? He emulated his Lady Knight for the idealistic innocent that she was and he had already broadened her world to include a lifetime's worth of unsavoury affairs.
There was a war within their own House of Lannister. Gone were the days of pondering familial alliances as if they actually had options.
To stay alive and breathing in this profane game of Cyvasse was a victory in itself.

He wrapped a shielding arm around Brienne's restless form, pressing his chin into her shoulder. He could feel her coiled tense muscles rippling beneath her skin. She was wound more tightly than he had expected.

“Jaime, I need to make an amendment.” Her voice came suddenly and startled him from his reverie. “I know what I'm about to say is probably terribly misguided and I cannot believe I am suggesting this myself, but I fear my conscience cannot rest soundly until I give it voice.”

He nervously glanced around their chamber.
It troubled him to think that there may be an unseen listener to their conversation in these close confines. If only he could brush the concern aside. It disturbed him deeply that if the whispers were true, the dark agents of Brandon Stark could peer through any nook or cranny.
That he may have been eavesdropping upon them since the beginning, disguised in one of his many forms. Witnessing their jests and repartee. Hearing his wenches contented sighs during their lovemaking.
Sounds only intended to reach Jaime's ears.
This conversation was risky.

He tugged on her shoulder with his arm, encouraging her to turn and face him. She took the hint. The closer they were, the quieter they could be. Nose to nose he only hoped she would speak in code.
“They are a piece of you.” She whispered. “One you should not deny. Disagreements aside you have a responsibility to both. An obligation. You know this Jaime, just as well as I do and I feel deep down you do not want to desert them completely. There is too much history shared.” Brienne swallowed. “You loved your children.”
“I told you they never felt like.....”

“Myrcella?” It stopped his protest in its tracks. It was one of the first deep conversations they had shared on a cold night. Whilst he had sent Brienne out to protect the Stark girls, he had been unable to shield his own offspring. His daughter dying in his arms a haunting vision he would never be free of.

“That was an exception. I only got to be a father for a fleeting minute before it was all snatched away.”

“But I know you Jaime. And to fail another, to leave your -” She mouthed the next word, ‘unborn.’ “- unguarded to meet its fate is not the type of man you are. You are good.” She affectionately cupped his cheek. “I don't think you could forgive yourself for not being there for -” Mouthed again 'your baby,' then a large sigh “- or -” ....slow deliberate movement of her lips 'your sister.'

Sorrow flitted across her face as she realised there would eternally be more than two people in this relationship. She had fallen for a twin and his heart would always be torn between the family he was born to and the woman he chose to couple with. A wave of adoration settled over him as he appreciated the magnificence of a soul who could comprehend all that. It made him grateful for his journey of awakening, which had thankfully opened his eyes to look beyond his shallow existence and enabled him to see the loveliness that lay beyond a face.

Hidden within gleaming sapphire eyes. He nodded his acceptance of her revised terms without argument. She was right, confounded woman! He'd be damned if he was to admit that to her. She would be insufferable. Instead he said, “we will work it out.”

He would need to tweak the plan, the wording. Something to echo this conversation, so it didn't strike suspicion if they were being listened to. He could not afford to leave the slightest margin for error.

“Can you sleep now wench?” Jaime smiled. “I hope so. My conscience is clear but now I am worried instead.” “Why?” “What if my own amendment costs me you?”

He could only hold her in reply. He had no guarantees and this was a dangerous game they were playing.
Catalyst

Chapter Summary

A return to Canon with the first excerpt from Episode 4.

Chapter Notes

Wow - after today's episode I am soooo glad I started writing this fic.
It is my solace and contentment.
JB forever! <3

Days seemed to crawl in the North.
The harsh timeless quality just another thing Jaime had come to loathe about this God forsaken
place. He tried to stride with purpose. To affect an air of contentment. He was failing.

However, he mused, that could be of benefit to them in the long run.
If he seemed too comfortable, it would make his sudden departure even more abrupt. They needed
to sense at least slight agitation from him.

This was one of the points he and Brienne had discussed when they could steal away. It wasn't
often they could find a suitable guise. Hunting was a common excuse, although there was little to
no game. Soldiers needed to be fed and the barren countryside had been thoroughly scoured by the
armies on their departure in the weeks prior. This bought them time.

It was on these treks they tweaked their repertoire. Each instance carefully constructed to alleviate
suspicion. On one occasion, Jaime came up with the suggestion of taking Pod with them, all the
better to seem less conspicuous.
Once safely distanced from Winterfell and notably absent of Ravens, they would find a way to
separate from the Squire. Brienne felt badly using Podrick in their ruse but Jaime insisted she
needed practice. Both for the ploy itself and in learning to ignore the guilt.
Although she was going along with him, Jaime felt she was still too easily led by her sense of
obligation.

“He is perfectly safe.” Jaime would assure her. “It will do the lad good to be out of the castle
grounds.”
“Will he not wonder why we are abandoning him?”
Jaime snorted in amusement. “Podrick? He hardly seems to be of a contemplative mind.”

In truth...Jaime had already made provisions for that very question.
Through facial expressions and subtle suggestions he had heavily implied that he and his woman
were sneaking off to be intimate. This had cowed Podrick into asking no further questions and
staying far away until they returned. No need to tell the wench though. He highly doubted she
would appreciate his tactic.

All had backfired however when they returned and Podrick wouldn't meet Brienne's eye.
He stared every which way but straight at her and a concerned crease appeared in the centre of her brow.

She had looked to Jaime for answers, who had stifled a laugh and shrugged. He hung back, riding his horse slowly and watched the scene unfold, as the Lady Knight unleashed a torrential inquisition at the 'shady' behaviours of her Squire. Poor Pod....it was one thing to serve a single fierce warrior woman but quite a confronting other to wait in the woods whilst she liased with her lover.

The Squire shifted uncomfortably in the saddle, avoiding her gaze and sputtering over his answers. Jaime couldn't hear their exact conversation but it was priceless just the same.

Eventually Brienne whirled her horse around with a sudden jolt and glared at Jaime. It was too much, he could no longer contain his amusement.

He trotted his mount over to hers and gave her his best shit eating grin. “Get over it wench.”

As Jaime fondly recalled the memory, he could still see the proverbial steam radiating off her. Even the ear bashing he had endured in their chambers that night had been worthwhile.

A chill seeped under his skin, creeping in despite leather and furs. Days like that – of love and laughter – may well be long behind them.

He had been roaming the ice coated grounds as per usual when he noticed the raven. Unlike Bran’s minions this bird had flown towards the Maester's tower as trained. It carried a message. Dark wings, dark words. The old adage intoned woefully in his mind.

It had been what? A month since the troops left Winterfell?

He entered the bustling courtyard and saw them.

Sansa stood speaking with the Maester. She was handed a scroll. Brienne stood beside her, stoic but apprehensive. The pair trailed briskly into a more private alcove off the main yard.

Jaime was close upon their heels.

Driven by a sense of urgency he barged through the arched cover-way to join them.

“As are the rest of her advisors...” Sansa’s hushed tones reached his ears.

The red headed Stark girl trailed off as she noticed his approach, her icy blue eyes frosted and hostile. The look she gave him could curdle milk. He only wished Brienne had seen it. His Lady Knight followed Sansa’s line of vision to acknowledge his presence in their midst.

“What happened?” Jaime was past empty civilities. The girl despised him anyway.

Brienne turned to Sansa for permission to include him. A subtle nod of approval and she began to divulge.

“Euron Greyjoy ambushed Queen Daenerys and her fleet. One of the dragons was killed, several ships destroyed. Missandei captured.” Her delivery was matter-of-fact, surprisingly devoid of emotion. She took her duty as a commander with utmost seriousness. It was in sharp contrast to the warm, feeling, spirited woman he knew when they were alone. None of the news was good.

An eerily triumphant smirk twitched at the corners of the Lady of Winterfell's mouth.

“I always wanted to be there when they execute your sister.” Her tone was glacial and biting.

“ Seems like I won't get the chance.”

Sansa did not even attempt to conceal her glee or the delight she received from watching his reaction. Damage inflicted, she coolly turned and walked away.

Brienne watched her vanish across the courtyard. Concern emanated from her entire countenance.

She had seen it this time. Heard it firsthand. The barely contained malice towards him and his family.

He knew she was taken aback. Jaime had forewarned her, but as he’d known, Brienne of Tarth was oblivious to the darker inner workings of those she protected. Dread settled over Jaime as they exchanged perturbed glances. He inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment of what they had
just witnessed and heard. His Lady Knight responded in kind before briskly trailing after Sansa. There was nothing they could say to each other.

Not here. Not now.
The crackling of wood filled the close confines of their chambers as Jaime set another log upon the fire. He had complained of the heat upon his first night in her room (mainly as a not so smooth manoeuvre to remove items of clothing), yet tonight he could not shake the chill. He strongly suspected that the gelidity was within him rather than the actual bower.

Council talks had kept Brienne from his arms for longer than usual, though it was not surprising given the recent development. Jaime had ventured to the banquet hall but had made his trip brief. The news was spreading fast - predictions for the battle to end all battles the words on everybody's lips.

“Five coppers says, she burns to death.”
“’I'll take that! Dubble or nuthin' if the dragon swallows 'er whole aften.’” Northmen. They clanked their goblets together and the walls rumbled with their raucous laughter.
Jaime tried not to sneer in disgust. This was not a conversation he wanted to hear. He hastily gathered up dinner for them both, hoping Brienne would seek him out when she discovered he wasn't at table.

He finished arranging their meals and cutlery, trying to ignore his heavy heart. With each hour the lead weight descended further, pushing against his chest and threatening to concave it.

How Jaime loathed himself this night. He despised his past, he abhorred his current predicament and he cursed his plan.
But this attitude would never do, it would only make it worse for her. Looking upon the knives and forks he forced himself to smile. Recalling the time he failed at dinner. The way his wench had wordlessly stabbed his steak rather than continue to watch him struggle like an idiot. Things had been pretty bleak then too, but they'd found their way out.

Eventually.

The door clicked open and she closed it quickly behind her again. Brienne leant against the door frame and took a deep breath in and out. Her blue eyes scanned the room and settled on him.
“I see you found me.”
“Thankfully I didn't have to look very far.” She looked tired.
“Rough day?” Jaime strode over to her and started unfastening her cloak. “Here, let me help.”
A faint smile tugged at the corner of her lips. “It will take two times longer than if I’d just done it myself.” “Then why are you letting me?”
She took the buckle from him, her long fingers making quick work of the straps.
They studied each others faces intently. Unspoken questions hung thickly in the air between them.

“I brought our dinner here.” Jaime gestured at the table. “I guessed you didn't have time to eat?”
“No but -” Brienne shook her head. “I don't want food. I am too unsettled.”
“You know that isn't very sensible, with all the work you've been doing, you need to take care of yourself. This isn't like you....”
“Jaime. Please. Spare us both. I know too well I will have to take care of myself very soon.”
Panicked at her insinuation he asked. “Where is the Stark boy?”
“He meets with his sister. I was dismissed so they could talk.”
He visibly relaxed, his shoulders slumping.
Brienne removed her tunic and sat to unlace her boots. “Aren't you eating?”
Jaime eyed the food going to waste. “I'm not keen on it either.”
“All your efforts....”
“It's the thought that counts right?” Then the truth. “I needed to keep myself occupied.”
“Jaime are we going to discuss it at all?”
“There is nothing to discuss.” His tone was firm.
They had heard all they needed to hear. Said all that needed to be said.

He crossed the room to stand in front of the fire. “Come here.”
He was gentle and non-commanding. Jaime was not looking for an argument right now.
Her thought process showed plainly on her face as she contemplated whether to balk at him.
However upon sensing his tenderness she decided to quash the instinct.
Brienne rose from her seat and walked to him. When she neared, he reached around her waist and pulled her close, closing the gap. Their position echoed their first night together, although stripped of its hesitations and nervousness.

“You know what I was thinking about earlier?” Jaime murmured.
“I can't say that I do?”
“Dinner in Harrenhal. Me incompetent with a knife. You in pink satin and Myrish lace....”
“Stop it.” She cringed at the recollection. “That gown.”
He chuckled at her. “We made a pretty good team even then.”
“Despite that unfortunate incident in the bear pit.”
“Hey! I rescued you fair maiden and we got out alive.”
Her indignant tone was precious. “As I remember you jumped unarmed in front of a bear – without an actual plan – and I ended up pulling you up the side wall.”
“Only because I let you go first. Chivalry has always been one of my strong points...”
“Come off it.” She scoffed. “I strongly suspect madness runs in your family.”
“Yes, it is inherited straight after impulsiveness. And what runs in your line hmmm? A lack of appreciation for the subtle art of humour?”
“Here I was thinking it was 'tow-headed plank' syndrome.” Her tone was wry.
“Gods, I say some shit.”
“You do.”
“How do you cope?”
“I have learned to overlook it.”
When had their banter become flirting?
When did this overwhelming flood of emotion first seize his heart?
And how, in heavens name did she manage to smile without actually smiling?
The trait was uniquely hers. She could convey so much through her voice and her eyes. He didn't know what he would do when he could no longer hear it.

Jaime leaned in and kissed her deeply. It took her by surprise at first but only a split second passed before she reciprocated. He felt her hand glide over his neck and knit in his hair. The other she pressed lovingly to his cheek. She was so gentle yet so fierce. How could she be so all encompassing? He slipped his left hand up the back of her undershirt – the front all the living hell that was tie up laces – pressing her fast against him. He trailed kisses to her jawline and then slowly down the length of her neck. She breathlessly whispered his name into his ear. “Jaime.”

There it was. Not Kingslayer. Not Ser Jaime. Just Jaime. Said in that particular way. He would never in a thousand lifetimes tire of hearing it. She reached for his laces and he quickly snatched her hand in his. She looked startled by his sudden change but he had to get this sentence out, before he lost the will entirely with all common sense long forgotten. “Have I told you,” his gaze burned intensely into her, his voice thick with emotion. “Your eyes look like Sapphires in the firelight?”

Her face crumpled, bottom lip trembling, as he invoked the codeword. He pressed a finger to her lips, shaking his head. “Save them. We are together now.” He kissed her again before she could react. Jaime could feel her body shaking, the desperation in her grasp as she urged him closer and closer to her. They sank into the bed furs, loving each other as if they would never let go. Holding on to every second, never squandering a moment. Relinquishing their individual identities and conjoining to become a single entity, so solid, so impenetrable, an army a million strong couldn't prise them apart. “Tomorrow...” She pleaded between ardent kisses.

Jaime realised he could not reply. His resolve was weak and the window of opportunity small. If he waited for sunrise he knew he would miss it and the plan would dissolve altogether. To both their detriments. He stilled momentarily, clutching the side of her face, fusing her image in his mind. His heart breaking at what he must do. A simmering heat stirred in her eyes. “Jaime, I lo-” He slid his hand over her lips to quiet her. “I know. I feel the same.” She looked confused, not understanding why he stopped her. “Don't say it. This isn't goodbye. Give me something to look forward to as Gods Brienne I want to hear it! I want to tell you. You have no idea how badly.” Superstition had clambered into his reasoning, but he didn't care. “But if we say those words now we could seal our fate.” She nodded, holding back tears. She was usually so strong, it was killing him. He made her take one more oath. “Tell me when you next see me. Make it a promise.” “I promise.” “Good. I can't wait to hear it wench.” He resumed their lovemaking, content that the sweetest phrase in the world lay ahead of them but secretly knowing that they had just spoken their last words to each other as their genuine selves.

* * *
Brienne drifted into a satisfied sleep, Jaime's arms wrapped around her.
He recognised that she was keeping him close, telling herself they had until tomorrow at least.
Jaime knew better.
He slowly and painfully untangled himself from her, every desire of his heart urging him to stay.
In silence he dressed, then sat for one pensive moment by the fire staring into the searing flames.
He hugged himself for comfort, resting his left hand upon his knee.
Could he really go through with this? Did he even want to?
No, it was not a matter of want. He needed to.
For their future. For honour. For her.
He just hoped they could pull this off.

Jaime allowed himself one last glance back at her sleeping form.
Of all the things he'd ever had to do – this was by far the hardest.
Then he crossed the room and left, shutting the door with a deliberately loud 'click' as arranged.
She had a warrior's senses, it should be more than enough to wake her.

Earlier in the evening he had stockpiled his supplies.
It had not mattered if he was seen, tomorrow all would know he had left anyway. Packing was
unavoidable regardless of his motive. Jaime retrieved the bag from where it was stashed and filled
his water flask.
He lead his horse to the yard and began the gargantuan task of saddling it up. It would give
Brienne more than enough time to dress and follow him.
He was adjusting the final straps when he heard her approach.

Good. Now we just have to run to plan....
He avoided looking directly at her, he just couldn't.

“They're going to destroy that city. You know they will.”
Well done wench – you remembered your script.

“Have you ever run away from a fight?” He replied.
She practically ran to him, grabbing his face with both hands. Forcing him to turn and look at her.
He had not been emotionally prepared for the physical contact or the impact it would have on him.
“You're not like your sister. You're not. You're better than she is.”

Pangs of both pride and pain blossomed and burst inside his chest. She was excellent, even when
her heart was shattering. But his was too.
“You're a good man and you can't save her.”
He had to look away. The earnestness of her eyes too much to endure.

“You don't need to die with her.” This just became very, very real.

“Stay here. Stay with me.” Brienne was breaking.
Her voice splintering into a thousand tiny shards of emotion. Each one piercing his heart.

Even if their words were pre-agreed, the feelings were real.

“Please. Stay.” She begged him. Her chin quivered.
His wench was just millimeters away from tears. He had never seen her cry.
He never wanted to see her cry. His cast his eyes down, this was too much.

Jaime fortified himself for her. The armour of his aim was strong.
She had correctly played her part. Now he needed to do the same.

He reached up and gripped her hand in his. Perceptively nodding of his own accord.
Of course he yearned to stay. The last thing he wanted to do was leave her.

He rubbed the back of her hand affectionately with his thumb.
The smallest signal of encouragement that wouldn't be noticed by outsiders.
A private gesture to brace her for what was to come. Then he gently removed her hand from his
face.
“You think I'm a good man?” He summoned one final surge of inner strength so he could look her in the eye. Jaime had memorised the words to come by heart.
“I pushed a boy out of a tower window, crippled him for life - for Cersei.” This is what Bran would want to hear if he was listening....
“I strangled my cousin with my own hands just to get back to Cersei.” Sadness was consuming him. He fought down the brimming tears....
“I would have murdered every man, woman and child in Riverrun - for Cersei.” A blatant lie.
A new crime for the wolves to howl at.
They would have heard the horror of his empty threats from Edmure Tully sooner or later. His doubters would never know it was for Brienne that no blood had been shed. That he cared more about not being at odds with her, than he did about winning back Cersei's precious Riverlands.
Brienne was finding his own character assassination difficult to hear. She inhaled sharply, barely keeping her tears at bay.
It was Jaime's cue to leave.

He took one small step back and hesitated.
“She's hateful.”
Finally a truth - to be followed by a simple yet believable statement, born of self-loathing.
He swallowed around the lump in his throat. “And so am I.”

He turned abruptly, mounting his horse.
The night air reverberated with the violent sobs of his beloved.
He knew she couldn't fake that. She was crying for him.
For fear of his death.
For fear they never speak nor see each other again.
For fear they would never declare their love.

Jaime kicked his horse into action and rode away.
He couldn't look back, he would come undone.

* * *

In the shadows, dark eyes spied. Perched unseen within the stable walls.

The Lady of Tarth broke her heart in the cold.
The Kingslayer, true to form, had been the one to dash it to pieces, as he had a young boys legs.
The traitor went South - how predictable.
He and his diabolical twin had started all this.
Did the former Maid really think she could change him?
He would meet his end at King's Landing.

Black wings took flight into the night air – returning to the Godswood and their waiting Master.
Our brave Lady Knight faces Winterfell without Jaime...

The gaps in the episodes left so many unanswered questions.
Brienne's POV of the morning after their heartbreaking farewell. . .

The fire had gone out. In her chambers and in her heart. Quenched by a deluge of tears.
She had forgotten to tend to it. When had she finally fallen asleep?
The cold was biting. It nipped at her exposed flesh through the cracks of her robe like razored teeth, sinking in and tearing out the few remnants of her defences which remained in tact.
Though – how could there be anything left?

She was certain all her walls had crumbled last night. Reduced to dust and debris.
Brienne gazed wistfully at Jaime's side of the bed. The depression his golden head had left in the pillow perfectly preserved.
As though he was only gone to make water and would return at any moment.

It was not the first time for the Lady of Tarth everything had become ruin.
She was no stranger to emotional pain. Her whole life had been comprised of torment and ridicule.
Rejection flowed deep in her veins. Nor was she unfamiliar with the grips of loss.
Her mother. Her siblings. Renly.

They had all been taken from her, one by one and each time she summoned the courage to start anew.
This occasion was different though. If felt foreign and more severe. The first losses were family, not romantic love.
Though neither was Renly, she conceded. Brienne had come to understand her infatuation was a figment of girlish fantasy. An emotional delicacy which people naturally assumed she was incapable of possessing from her boyish demeanour.
But he had never been hers. Only in her mind.
She had thought Renly benevolent – only to slowly uncover it was instead the most dreaded of motivations that inspired his kindness towards her – pity.
False niceties from a gracious soul. But not love.

When at first she had crossed paths with the Kingslayer she had thought him the most despicable of men.
The worst breed of shameless oathbreaker who openly scorned those around him and cared nothing for his Knightly codes. Taunts and insults flew from his mouth like arrows from an Archer's bow.
He mocked her to her face, cleverly crafted jibes and jests and flung all her noble ideas back at her
– undermining her core values and vexing her like nobody in Seven Hells ever could.

But he was honest, upfront. She was not a fair maiden and she knew it. He never pretended with her. He called it as he saw it. So when he had protected her it had been for the truest of reasons – he recognised something within her that he thought worthy. The respect was genuine. Not whispering behind her back. Not sympathy for her misfortunes. Not outright disregard. An authentic understanding of what integral parts comprised Brienne of Tarth. To him she had merit by the virtue of her personality alone and he had suffered great personal risk to spare her from the crueler aspects of Westerosi life. Never would she find another who regarded her the way Jaime did. Nor could she adore anyone to the same degree.

Ser Jaime Lannister; her Knight. Her saviour. Her friend. Her lover. The man who bestowed upon her a Knighthood and made all her wildest dreams come true. He was affixed irreversibly upon her heart and now he was out of reach...

No. She stopped her downward spiral. Could not allow herself to free-fall into this pit of despair. That was death. That was final. This shouldn't be compared. He was riding South. He would find a way to save his twin sister and unborn child. He would weave one last masquerade and convince the world he died in the process. He would meet with her on Tarth and they would begin their life together. She had to be iron-clad. She was stalwart enough and Jaime had placed his faith in her. Brienne must play her part. Resolute she rolled from under the fur covers. Her cheeks were stiff, stained with dried tears. Her stomach both roiled and tied itself in knots interchangeably. Today would be difficult – but there were harder days yet to come.

* * *

Brienne crossed the yard as a notably solitary figure. Usually she and Ser Jaime were inseparable in the mornings. First breaking their fast, then sparring in the practice yard. The Lady Knight could swear she felt eyes keenly observing her. Heads turned as she passed but when she glanced in their direction they quickly looked away. Was it just her imagination? Perhaps she felt vulnerable, now that she found herself alone again. From the angling ascent of the sun she had clearly overslept. Most out of character for a staunchly punctual personal guard. That must have been the reason for the unwanted attention. She quickened her pace, seeking Lady Sansa.

Earlier, as she donned her armour (both proverbially and physically) Brienne had tried to compose what she would say. Every sentence she arranged sounded plausible in her head but when it came time to utter it aloud the air was sucked from her lungs in a shuddering breath. She was supposed to appear outraged. Thwarted and wronged by her illicit lover. Her grief could not become a public spectacle, lest she lose all respect from the men she commanded and become mortifyingly pigeonholed as a fragile female. She had cried last night though. Out in the open – on display for any onlooker to see. Brienne had begun so strongly but her emotions had given out. Unable to be contained, she couldn't suppress the flood. She prayed to the Seven that her levees would hold. That for today at least they could spare her last shred of shattered pride.
She was acting the part of a woman played. Jilted out of her maidenhood by a man consumed with an irrepressible obsession for his sister.
Jaime had advised her to be the exact opposite of him...
Contrite, self-deprecating and ever so grateful for the succour of the Starks.
To agree with any and all criticisms of him.
A bitter draught to swallow.

When she spotted Lady Sansa inspecting the reconstruction of the damaged armoury, Brienne knew she still could not find the words.
She would have to improvise as Jaime had taught her.
Upon her approach the Lady of Winterfell excused herself from the conversation with the builders. Wordlessly she beckoned Brienne follow her to one of the more secluded snow covered gardens.
Sansa's countenance was stern, expressionless. Her protector hoped they had not received another raven of grave tidings.
She wasn't sure she could process more ill omens today.

Once alone, the red headed young woman turned to peer directly at Brienne, her icy blue eyes scrutinising the Lady Knight's face.
It was difficult not to squirm under such close inspection. Finally Sansa drew in a deep breath. “You were wrong to trust him. I knew his sister well – they are two of a kind.”
Brienne was taken aback. She already knew!...How?
Jaime's warnings that they were being watched resonated ominously in her subconscious mind. “Clearly you knew better than I, My Lady.” Impassive but morose, she lowered her head as if shamed.
The Lady of Winterfell pursed her lips. “His offspring was ruthless as well. Sadistic of mind, black of soul. It runs in their blood. Like father like son. What else could that toxic combination produce?”
“I do not know My Lady.”
“Yet still you vouched for him.” Was that a question or an accusation?
“I am....” She bought herself time to think through her answer. “Inexperienced in the ways of men. Although it is hard for me to admit it, I now know I was unwise. My eyes are open. I paid a bitter price for it.” She followed Jaime's instructions to the letter.
Almost. “You did allow him to stay....”

Lady Stark smirked. Brienne instantaneously knew the meaning behind it. Expressions like this were Jaime's trademark.
Sansa clearly thought herself quite clever. “Best keep traitors where they can be watched. I knew it was only a matter of time. Lannisters lie like second nature. It comes as if breathing to them....they are well known by reputation alone.” She began to walk around Brienne in a slow circle, forcing her to turn to keep up.
A She Wolf, honing in on an injured deer.
The predator was closing in, smelling the weakness of her prey. “It does make one question where your loyalties are held.”

Brienne barely recognised the cold creature in front of her.
She hastily gathered her thoughts to defend against Sansa's assertion. “You have no cause to wonder. My lessons were hard learnt. Countless victims have been scarred in one way or another by the Lions' claws.” The Lady of Tarth felt so piteously weak in this moment.
As if she was rolling over and exposing her belly to the alpha dog. She hated it. “I know why you may doubt me but I humbly ask you not to judge me too harshly by my error. The Lannister's have infiltrated many of our lives with their glib tongues.” Sansa regarded her with condescension,
continuing her slow concentric walk.

*By what right does the Wolf judge the Lion?*

Jaime's words for the Starks and their disdainful superiority. Brienne's temper flared. Sansa warranted a reminder of her own history. “Forgive me for saying so, My Lady but you were in fact married to Lord Tyrion at one stage - if I am not mistaken.” So much for contrition.

The younger woman stopped in her tracks. “Of course. Yes.” Her tone softer, a child chastened. “I have not forgotten it.” She nodded thoughtfully. Then her eyes narrowed into vicious slits as a shadow crossed her face. Malice dripped into her voice, lacing each syllable with venomous undercurrent. “But I never lay with him......” Her implication hung thick in the air.

Message delivered, Sansa reprised her victorious smirk. Turning on her heel she strode purposefully away, confident that her dutiful guard would follow her.

Even though Brienne's body obeyed her head questioned loudly.... Could this young woman before her still be considered the same as the sweet natured girl they had sworn Lady Catelyn to protect?
Volatility

Chapter Notes

Caution! Drama ahead.
If you like the Starks - you're probably not gonna like where this is going. LOL
Things are about to get very angsty but to me it answers a couple of questions. . .

Three weeks later there were still whispers.
The den of wolves rife with slurs she never wanted to hear.

Kingslayer's Whore.
The Northerners were unforgiving, especially to outsiders.
She called to mind the Tavern girls she had encountered on the road with Jaime.

They Lay with Lions.
That had been their crime and death had been their punishment.
Severe, unjust and lacking compassion.
Brienne had avenged them then but little did she know one day, she herself would share their alleged shame.
She did not regret her love affair with Jaime. Not for one moment.
But to be an unmarried noblewoman willingly deflowered by the enemy and then left unguarded against their insults was a consequence to their plan neither had preempted.

* * *

Sansa sat at the high table, sipping her tea and intently watching the breakfast proceedings.
Mealtime had been underway in the banquet hall for a good half hour. Her Lady Bodyguard was only just now sitting down opposite her squire. Late to table. Again.
Podrick scowled at something being said by a smith at the adjacent bench. She read Brienne's lips, 'ignore it.'
The first female Knight in Westeros picked listlessly at her food. Moving it around on her plate rather than eating. She looked paler than usual. Quite off colour. Sansa observed as the former Maid of Tarth, pushed the plate away and slowly sipped water.
Squire Payne asked her a question, his expression concerned. Brienne waved away his enquiry.
She laid her elbow on the table and held her forehead in her hand. Sliding it down slowly to cover her nose and mouth.

“How many times do you think he bed her?” Lady Stark asked her brother.
Bran sat beside her in his wheeled chair. He followed her line of vision to the Lady Knight.
“That is something I could not say.” He responded.
Sansa frowned. “We needs must take precautions.....” Taking a sip of tea she let Bran digest her meaning.
“The world doesn't need more Lannisters – and I need my sworn sword.”

* * *
“Podrick!” Brienne bounded through the door to the armoury. She had been asked to instruct a training session today and she was already behind schedule.

“Yes M’Lady, Ser.” Pod’s head appeared around the door-frame to the weapons room.

“Have you seen my armour?”

“It has been sent to be cleaned M’Lady. Everyone’s has. By order of Lady Stark.” Brienne sighed. She could have been told first. “Right. Leathers it is.”

She collected a bundle of blunted tourney swords - she would not teach these men with wood, the balance was all wrong – and headed for the door. Podrick scrambled to keep up with her and politely took the load from her arm. “Thank you Pod.”

Out in the practice yard a crowd of eager men had gathered. Many of them were green and had little to no experience in battle. Most trained soldiers had ridden South with Jon. Winterfell needed guards and fighters since their armies were decimated through successive wars. The allure of hot meals and an honest living appealed to many of the displaced townsfolk.

She strode to the centre of the practice yard, head held high. Confidence was key. As per usual she heard the expected sniggers. A few men nudged each other and whispered obscene comments. Brienne was glad she could not hear them.

“Armed combat training.” Her voice carried, commanding and forceful, silencing them where they stood. “As potential guards, you will need the ability to shield Winterfell against invaders. On duty you are stationed in pairs and form the front line of defence. When enemies infiltrate a castle....”

She nodded to Podrick, who began distributing the swords. “Their foremost task is to eliminate the watchmen. And your job as watchmen – is to ensure they don't succeed.” She paused for emphasis before continuing. “Everybody break off into pairs, I will be assessing your primary skills in swordsmanship.”

The men scurried to obey.

A short time later she walked between the dueling pairs, critiquing their stance and offering advice. She monitored how well they took instruction and their willingness to learn. Podrick did the rounds as well. Reiterating the advice dispensed by Ser Brienne of Tarth. Her voice rose high above the metallic clamour of clashing swords.

Unbidden visions floated through her mind of Jaime observing a similar training session the month before.... She had spotted him casually leaning against the remains of a wall, arms folded, grinning at her. When she had approached him and asked what exactly was so amusing he had told her to come closer.

Hesitant but curious, as she leaned in, he had whispered wickedly, “Your commander's voice. All these men held in the palm of your hand. You really are quite bossy wench. But I like it – it does things to my crotch.”

She had furrowed her brow at him and stomped off, whilst he laughed heartily. She flushed as she thought back on it and scuffed at a snowdrift with her boot, waiting for the burning sensation in her cheeks to pass.

Push it aside, back to work. Brienne told herself.

“Alright! Enough! Time to prove your ability.” The clanging stopped and the men formed a semicircle.

A few pairs with the most potential had been selected. “Now we will try arm to arm combat. Two versus one, that should even the odds.” She picked up a sword of her own. “Come on.” She pointed at the ground in front of her with the tourney sword.

“We're s'posed to fight you?” He was a bold one. Middle aged and wrinkling his nose in distaste. Of course he wouldn't want to be beaten by a woman.
“If you want the job – yes.”
His sparring partner had more balls. He ran at her. She easily knocked his sword aside.
She lectured as she went. “First mistake! Underestimating your opponent. Never assume from age,
stature or gender that your enemy is weaker than you. Over confidence kills more soldiers than lack of experience does.”
The older man decided to try his steel. Sure enough, he bit the dirt quicker than his partner did.
Though he looked none too happy about it.
“Next pair!”
These came at her in unison, choosing a two pronged attack. She made quick work of them.
“I admire your choice of teamwork. Working with a partner will increase your chances of staying alive.” And so she progressed through the teams gradually. Assisting where she could.

* * *

A man's eyes turned white.
A will gave way to another's.
The blonde woman was focused on the boy.
It was his moment of opportunity.

* * *

“Pick up your sword!” The force with which she had knocked it from the boys grasp had sent him sprawling backwards.
He was only slight of frame. He scrambled for purchase in the mud, only succeeding in falling over for a second time.
Brienne huffed, lowering her own weapon and offering her arm to help him stand.
The blow came out of nowhere.
The pommel of a practice sword driven into her abdomen with such force she doubled over. Her own sword slipping from her grasp. Nervous shouts erupted from the crowd as they tried to decide whether to intervene or if it was part of the routine.
Brienne was winded, it was so fast, she could scarcely process what was happening.
Trying to straighten and stand, she saw her assailant, the other practice partner, pain blinding her hazed vision of him. The pommel connected for a third time.
Pushing it with all his body strength into her gut.
This time she collapsed into the mud.

She was vaguely aware of Podrick dragging the attacker away.
Could hear shouts for help. Violent spasms of pain radiated throughout her body.
She curled instinctively in the fetal position, her arm wrapped around her stomach.
Then the world went black.
Brienne woke in her chambers.
The fire had been rekindled in the hearth and the room glowed with its steady warmth. Confusion settled over her as she made to sit up.

Cramping pains stabbed through her insides, knocking the wind from her with a gasp.
Something was wrong. She could feel it. She just couldn't grasp what it was.
The answer floated teasingly out of reach.

“You're awake.” Lady Sansa stood with her hands clasped at the foot of Brienne's bed.
Her dark gown blended seamlessly with the shadowed corners of the room. She strode to the doorway and spoke with an unseen attendant.
“Bring the tray I had prepared.” Their tones were hushed. Sansa closed the door with a subtle click.
“What happened?” Brienne’s voice was strained as she winced through the pain, struggling to recollect.

“One of your trainees went rogue. Some self-styled brigand or outlaw. He probably found it insulting to his ego to be schooled in fighting by a woman.”
The Stark girl stared down at her. She was trying to appear sympathetic but somehow it seemed insincere. “He has been apprehended. Squire Payne saw to that.”

Brienne nodded. The events slowly returning to her.
The attack had seemed so deliberate. Strangely pre-planned....

A knock at the door.
Sansa opened it as a serving girl entered, depositing a tea tray on the table. Lady Stark thanked the young woman and dismissed her from the room. Closing the door again behind her.
“How did I get here?”
“Podrick helped retrieve you from the practice yard. My attendees changed your clothes and bathed you. I oversaw that personally. I know how important dignity is to you.”
Sansa poured the tea as she spoke. Each move precise and meticulously elegant. The product of years of tutelage by a diligent Septa.

Brienne forced herself to wriggle back in the bed, propping herself against the pillow. She gritted her teeth through the resulting agony.
Once elevated, she lifted the blanket and parted her undershirt to inspect the damage. Three burgeoning bruises already lined their way across her lower stomach.
Even in the faint light beneath the covers she could make out their colours. Hues of dark purple and blue. Angry and deep. They weren't restricted to the surface. She knew from the pain they stretched internally as well. Brienne frowned.

“Here – drink.” Lady Sansa extended her long arm, offering her the cup and saucer.
Brienne dropped the blanket and graciously accepted it from her. “Thank you My Lady.”
Sansa smiled. “It will make you feel more like yourself.”

Brienne tried to return the gesture but kept quiet. Their relationship had been strained ever since Jaime had left.
The Lady of Winterfell smoothed her skirt beneath her and perched on the side of the bed. “I do hope this means we can put our disagreement to rest. I do not like the enmity between us.”
Brienne blew on her tea and took a sip. The brew was strong and bitter. Not one she recognised.
Sansa watched her. “You were right.” She continued conceding, a sigh escaping her lips as if it were painful to admit.
The Lady Knight thought it best to drink her tea in silence and not respond. She didn't want to
incriminate herself or turn the tides of this conversation. 
The Stark girl spoke on. “We have all been seduced in one form or another by the Lannisters. Their reign will be over soon. They are best left behind in our past.”
Brienne forced herself to nod, draining her cup. She was relieved at least that their animosity was ebbing.
“Feel better?” Sansa asked.
“Yes My Lady, thank you again.”
A strange expression passed over the red head’s features. Her voice changed as she stared into thin air, contemplative.
“I know what you are going through...I had to do the same after Ramsay.”
“I beg your pardon Lady Stark?” Brienne was confused. Sansa’s statement seemed to come out of the blue, completely without nuance.
“It is a difficult road for a woman. But we can change our fate....” She turned to face Brienne. “You wouldn’t really want to bring the Kingslayer’s bastard into the world.”
Blood rushed deafeningly behind Brienne’s ears as she tried to process what she was hearing. “I don’t understand.”
Sansa’s icy eyes flicked to the empty tea cup. “The brew will finish what was started.”
The former Maid of Tarth’s blood ran cold, freezing her solid where she sat. The cup and saucer slipped from her numb fingers, clanging painfully against each other as they rolled and stopped in the furs.
The Lady of Winterfell leaned forward and gave her a chaste kiss on the top of the head. “Now you can continue to serve me, like you promised my Lady Mother.”
She rose from the bed and stood over her, every inch the wolf eyeing her downed prize.
“I will give you a few days leave to recover. You are going to have a rough night.” With that she left the room.

Cramping spasms had already begun, twisting her insides in unnatural manners. Devastation washed over her, raining down with broken dreams and falling tears. Her naivete had rendered her unaware of her own condition and left them exposed. Brienne could only clutch her stomach and let out an anguished cry – mourning what she had both gained and lost in a matter of minutes.
Chapter Summary

Meanwhile in the Crownlands . . .

Chapter Notes

And we've reached The Bells!

Thank you so much to everyone who is reading and on this journey with me.
I created this story to tie in with the canon of the show and try to right the wrongs.
So with this being said, I would like to take a moment to say something I most
definitely never thought I would.....
thank you show-writers D&D – for leaving so many delicious plot-holes for me to
exploit! Lol
JB Forever! <3

When undertaking a suicidal extrication, it would be generally considered wise to have some
semblance of a plan.
However, when the scheme also includes faking your own death without actually physically dying,
things get intrinsically more complex.
He had weeks to mull it over on his ride South. Night after night spent alone with nothing but his
morbid thoughts to keep him company.
No wench to chime in and bring him back to reality when his ideas veered off kilter.
Yes – Jaime thought - all that preparation for this.
He glanced around the tent where the Dragon Queen's forces had him chained up like an animal.

To this very moment he wasn't quite sure what he'd been thinking.
At some point along the road, he had decided that a prisoner exchange would be the answer.
When he left Winterfell, he had been armed with the knowledge that a Dragon had perished and
Missandei – Queen Daenerys' beloved handmaid – had been captured by Cersei.
Therefore logic would state that if the Dragon Queen captured him, a prisoner exchange could be
instigated.
Missandei would be returned to her Mistress and he would be delivered straight into Cersei's
clutches. (Whether that was only for Cersei to mete out her own punishment upon him was yet to
be seen.)
Echoes of post Battle of Whispering Wood had been his inspiration and it seemed like as plausible
plan as any.
Only – circumstances change.

In the weeks of his travel shit had clearly gone down and the situation worsened threefold.
So here he sat. A pawn without a move. A prisoner without a key.
And looking like a complete idiot.

Did he really believe the stalemate would have lasted this long?
Yes – whatever happened to falling back and regrouping?
Impasse and siege had been a primary tactic in the War of Five Kings.
But this battle did not belong to the stubborn Tully's or the 'oh so honourable' Starks.
No. This was run by Queens. Two of the most irrational, impulsive, egotistical women in existence.
If they had simply been left alone in a room together they'd have clawed each others eyes out.
But they wore crowns – so that meant they could drag every unwitting fool befuddled by their
charms, down to the depths of Seven Hells with them.
Himself included.

Jaime heard someone enter through the tent flap.
Then a familiar voice. “How did they find you?” Tyrion.
Jaime lifted his gold hand in response. It was almost comical.
He had intended to be discovered of course. That's why he wore it in plain sight. Avoided covering
it up the way he had on the ride North.
“Did you consider taking it off?” But apparently the thought that he did it on purpose hadn't
entered Tyrion's mind.
“Cersei once called me 'the stupidest Lannister.'”
Silence. Thank you for disagreeing little brother.
Did he really come across as that lack witted? He never expected Cersei's line to be believable.

“And you're going back to her. To die with her.” A statement. An untrue one.
Jaime did not nod nor agree, he just watched his brother circle around to face him.
Last they had spoken, he told Tyrion he was happy with Brienne. Didn't this seem a sudden
reversal of heart?
It hurt to realise even his brother didn't believe in them. They were completely on their own.
It was for the best though. He had vowed not to include Tyrion in his true intentions.
And as for Cersei; “You've underestimated her before.”

Jaime checked for guards or eavesdroppers before they continued this avenue of discussion.
“She's going to die. Unless you can convince her to change her course of action.”
“Difficult to do from here.” Tyrion seemed to have overlooked that Jaime sat captive in chains.
The 'Hand' of Queen Daenerys Targaryen brandished a key.
Jaime was suitably impressed but realism of their sister's nature had to play a part. “When have I
ever been able to convince Cersei of anything?” It was sad but true.

“Try.” This gave Jaime pause. His brother was one of only two people in the world who presumed
to know his good nature.
“If not for yourself, if not for her....”
Yet he assumed but a moment before that he had abandoned the love of his life to run back to
Cersei?!
Perhaps Tyrion did not know him at all.
“.....then for every one of the million people in that city....”
Brienne could always see through his charades and villainous words to the person beneath - Jaime
wondered if Tyrion could do the same.
“....innocent or otherwise.”

He affected his best cocky persona and cut off Tyrion mid-spiel. “To be honest, I never really
cared much for them.”
With the exception of irreversibly tarnishing my reputation in order to save them from an inferno.
“Innocent or otherwise.” Baiting, he awaited his baby brother's reply.
“You do care for one innocent.” Tyrion called him out, but not in the way he expected. The baby. Jaime's eyes downcast. “I know you do. And so does Cersei.”

_Gods! He sounded like Brienne._

“She has a reason now.”

Tyrion had never understood the enormity of their sister's appetite for power and control. It saddened Jaime more than he could say. “The child is the reason she'll never give an inch. All the worse things she's ever done, she's done for her children....It's not impossible that she'll win.”

“She won’t.”

Why was Tyrion so sure? “Her enemies forces have been depleted – as she said they would be. Two of the three dragons are dead....” Jaime nodded to himself, reasoning it out. “She’s evened the odds.”

“The city will fall tomorrow.”

“She has the Lannister army, she has the Golden Company-”

Tyrion argued against his logic. “I defended the city the last time it was attacked! I know it better than anyone. It will fall tomorrow!”

Annoyance filled Jaime. If Tyrion was so certain of their imminent defeat, why were they even having this conversation?

“Then I suppose I'll die tomorrow - if not before.”

“Why?!” Tyrion seemed genuinely perplexed.

Jaime just stared at his little brother. If Jaime was the stupidest Lannister then Tyrion had always been the smartest. How could he not see that this miserable equation ended only with his untimely demise? Whether at the hands of the Dragon Queen or by the ire of Cersei, the method did not matter. There was no answer. For any of them. He had figured that out long ago.

It had been his hope that his death would be in word only. That likelihood was fading by the hour.

Tyrion neared him, sitting close by so they were at eye level. “Escape.”

Jaime's eyes darted confused. His brother kept talking...

“The two of you together – remember where we met? Where they keep the dragon skulls beneath the Red Keep?” Jaime nodded subtly. He remembered.

“Take her down there. Keep following the stairways down, down as far as they'll go. You'll come out onto a beach at the foot of the Keep. A dinghy will be waiting for you.”

He could only stare at his younger sibling - this was madness!

“Sail out of the bay, if the winds are kind, you'll make it to Pentos.”

Jaime raised his head slightly. _Tarth he thought. This was wishful thinking...._

“Start a new life.”

Tyrion still did not recognise that Jaime's wants and desires had changed. That the new life he craved was with Brienne and not Cersei.

The plan had flaws. Fatal ones. “Sail right past the Iron Fleet and into a new life?” Sounds a lot less likely than Cersei winning this war.”

“There won't be an Iron Fleet for much longer. Do it! If you don't, you'll never see Cersei again.”

Jaime retreated deep inside himself. Introspective. He was acutely aware that every decision he had made in his life had led up to this single most important one.

The fate of his twin sister and his child. His own chances of coming out of this alive.

One thought screamed louder at him than all the rest combined. He had promised his Lady Knight he would find a way to protect them. To be the man of honour she believed him to be. This was the only way he could try to be worthy of her.
When he met Tyrion's eyes again, his decision had been made.
His younger brother saw his conviction. “Swear to me.”
“You have my word.” After all his oathbreaking. After all his crimes.
This would be the vow he lived or died by.
He had first sworn it to Brienne and now he repeated it to Tyrion.

“If it works -” Tyrion elaborated on the finer points of the plan as he unlocked Jaime's shackles. “ - give the order to ring all the bells in Kings Landing and open the gates. That will be our signal that the city surrendered.”
“I'll try.” Jaime promised as best he could. There was a lot to achieve and very little chance of successfully pulling it off.
Tyrion knew it too. The human limitations of the older brother he idolised so much. He spoke quickly, the urgency of the situation taking hold.
“I never thought. I'd get to repay the favour. Remember ring the bells and open the gates.”
“You Queen will execute you for this.” Jaime warned Tyrion, concern emanating from his pores.
He loved his little brother. He always had. He didn't want to be the cause of his death.

Tyrion was quick to alleviate Jaime of any guilt. “If Daenerys can make it to the Throne without wading through a river of blood, maybe she'll show mercy to the person who made that possible.”
Jaime knew it was doubtful at best. The Targaryen's were not known for their clemency.
His younger sibling stood proudly before him, his voice infused with conviction and sadness.
“Tens of thousands of innocent lives, one not particularly innocent dwarf....it seems like a fair trade.”
Jaime admired his bravery. He would do all he could to ensure it wasn't in vain.
Tyrion momentarily looked away, when his gaze returned to Jaime's face he was overcome with emotion.
“If it weren't for you, I never would have survived my childhood.”
Although a part of him knew there was truth in the statement, Jaime didn't want to believe it.
He couldn't comprehend that the world could be so cruel to the baby brother he loved so much.
“You would have.”
Tyrion just shook his head, tears filling his eyes. “You were the only one who didn't treat me like a monster.....You were all I had.”
Jaime's own eyes flooded. He pulled his brother into an embrace, feeling him sob quietly against his chest.
Both knew – no matter what happened. One way or another.
They were never going to see each other again.

Jaime buried his face in Tyrion's shoulder and squeezed his eyes shut tight, embedding their goodbye in his memory forevermore.
Then gathering all their masculine strength they released each other, sharing one final lingering look of mutual trust, respect and love.
With that, Tyrion hastily rose and retreated from the tent.

Jaime sighed long and deep, pressed by the weight of the insurmountable task which lay ahead of him.
Brienne emerges from her chambers.

I wanted to explore how Brienne shifted from protecting Sansa, to serving Bran.

In the Godswood Brienne sought silence. The blanched white landscape only broken by the vermilion foliage of the Old Gods. The Weirwood wept, as had she.

Cold winds sporadically came howling through the barren branches like a pack of frenzied wolves on the prowl, it’s sharp claws scratching her bare face and whipping at her cloak. She barely flinched.

Here there was no Sept to the Seven. A place for mourning where she could ask the Mother to see the lost soul of her unborn child safely to the netherworld.

Once there had been a shrine – it had belonged to Lady Catelyn. But it was destroyed during the rampage of the undead dragon. Or so the Maester had told her. On the third day he was sent to her chambers to check on her well being. She had sent him away, barely opening the door long enough to ask the question. She would not allow Sansa Stark to expunge her guilt by thinking she sent her aid.

One of the stirring crimson leaves landed on the tip of her boot. She bent to collect it, removing her glove to study its scarlet veins and course texture. An eerie manifestation of nature. It cracked, brittle between her fingers, each piece resembling dried blood against her white skin. Blood. She had seen so much of it over the last week.

“The Old Gods listen.” Brienne lifted her head towards the voice. She was certain she had been alone. Bran Stark sat a few metres away. A blanket covering his knees and the wheels of his chair. “They do not discern by faith or appearance. They provide solace for the broken people.” He stared both at her and through her, his delivery almost melodic in his strange detached manner. “I understand more than anyone.”

She simply nodded. Unsure what to make of this boy. “We share a common transgressor – you and I.” One of his odd almost smiles. “Be glad for your misfortunes. Time has marked you by your suffering, your penitence already...
served.
A day comes when the crippled shall rise tall and you – Brienne the Beauty – will stand with us.”

Even in the cold winter air a rivulet of sweat trickled its way down the length of her spine.
Tingling and chilling.
He knew her past, the cruel nickname bestowed upon her by the men at Renly's camp.
His cryptic phrases alluded to him foreseeing the future as well.

But he could not read her mind. For she was not at all remorseful.
He was ignorant of her motivations or else he would know she was far from rejoicing.
She sought neither power nor status. Only respect, acceptance and love.
An honourable life, fulfilled by being spent with one person alone.....Jaime Lannister.
Her protector – not her transgressor.
Given the choice, she would pick him every time.

Though right now....

Having been betrayed by Sansa, the broody Lord who sat before her could be considered the lesser
of the two malicious Stark siblings;
and Brienne of Tarth was hastily running out of allies.
“Thank you for your words of comfort.”

A slight inclination of his head registered his acknowledgment – then Bran Stark's eyes turned
unsettlingly white.
Ravens burst forth from branches and awnings, taking wing to places far beyond the walls of
Winterfell.
Jaime's POV of the War for Kings Landing.

The black dragon circled above the city walls. The living embodiment of the grim spectre of death. A flying, keening nightmare made flesh and sinew. It's screeching brought the city to a halt, rattling bones and prompting children's desperate cries. Stampedes of smallfolk trampled each other in an attempt to escape its path of destruction. In the North, during the Battle of Winterfell, the sight of those beasts had brought comfort and hope. Today the last remaining monster drove skin from bone and took far more lives than it had ever saved. No wonder they went extinct – nature had no place for such atrocious creations. They upset the balance and were too great a power when wielded by unstable hands.

Jaime had been right about the Targaryen Queen, an emissary of destruction. Narcissistic and deranged like her father before her. He could only be glad Brienne was safe, far away from her bloodthirsty rampage. What small comforts he could garner in this apocalyptic wasteland that once resembled a city.

At least I rang the bells.
If I achieve nothing else I tried to spare the innocents.
I tried to save them...

The stairs seemed to be getting higher. Perhaps he was getting weaker. He stumbled through the lower tunnels of the Keep, each step an accomplishment in itself. The world as he knew it crumbled around him, with each breath he inhaled the ashes of its cremation. He was walking straight into the pyre.

A sinister dampness seeped from his back and side. Spreading as he strained. The occasional faint scent of warm blood reached his nostrils as it dripped through his clothes. He told himself if the wounds were fatal, he would be long dead by now. Euron's blade had sunk deep but thankfully inaccurate. Jaime strongly suspected this mercy was not enough to prevent the Stranger from paying him a visit today, but it would prolong his life for the time being at least. Of all the psychotic sons of bitches to encounter on his fools quest why did it have to be Euron? Jaime had hoped the egomaniac would care just enough about his Queen to let him be on his way. Their animosity long abandoned when Jaime turned his back on Cersei, relinquishing her to the mad pirate in the process. But instead he had goaded him, threatened his life and forced Jaime into a duel that any man with balls would have no choice but to accept. Of course she 'fucked' him. Cersei 'fucked' everyone. It was how she kept her men in line. However she was also his twin, whom he cared for (despite everything) and Jaime was a man of family and pride. Their ensuing battle had been for simple honour's sake.
Euron wanted to be the man who killed Jaime Lannister and was very determined in his goal. Jaime wanted to be the man on a boat to Tarth after a successful rescue mission. Their crossed paths made the fight unavoidable. Their aims negated each others. The coward didn't have to attack when his back was turned though - Jaime could have done without the second stab wound.

Who would have thought the fall of the Lannister dynasty would come down to this? Tywin himself could never had predicted it. How Father would roll in his crypt if he could see this firsthand. Euron Greyjoy and Daenerys Targaryen. In many regards they weren't dissimilar – each benefiting from the suffering of others and seeming to derive genuine pleasure from the process. Though at least Euron would own to it.

The Dragon Queen would deny. Go out of her way to ensure that the pages of history marked her as a liberator and all the unnecessary loss of life would be pinned upon the ambition of the Lannisters.

However – when the final battle lines were drawn, the Lions were simply trying to save their pride. Stand together and shield their cub. Claws retracted. Of course there had been battles for supremacy amongst themselves. Spouted threats from high towers. 'Hear Me Roar' was their house-words afterall. But – Lions attack when provoked or threatened. Dragons brought forth reigns of 'Fire and Blood'. Serving no purpose other than their own advancement. A continuously tightening stranglehold of power. Ever growing. Never enough.

The blood lines of Old Valyria. An empire built on a foundation of tyranny and broken backs. Intent on expansion, invasion and always seeking more. The Dothraki weren't enough. Slavers Bay wasn't enough. The hatching of not one but three miraculous (albeit terrifying) beasts, still had not been enough to sate her unquenchable thirst. The Dragon Queen had to have it all.

The Lioness by contrast would eternally crave the one thing she could never have. She wanted her cubs back. The ones lost to her forever in this game of thrones. Another Lion wanted to keep his family protected at all costs. Could carry on if he knew they survived - removed far from danger and safe in Essos. And this Lion yearned for his mate – she was distant from him now, sheltered in the freezing cold extremes of the North. All he craved was their reunion. To be held fast in her arms. The mere thought of her bolstered his strength.

Jaime continued to push himself on, through the deteriorating conditions, witnessing the end of an era. Yes - His family had its faults. Massive ones. They had made errors, supremely misguided decisions. Together they had inbred, quarreled and plotted to destroy one another. Exhibited the worst aspects of their own human natures. They had each suffered dearly for their misdeeds and now were paying the ultimate price.

But it consoled Jaime to know - when the going got tough, the pride pulled together for a common
cause.
Their wants were simple, familial and .....

The bricks and mortar of the stronghold shook violently, the entire building buckling and groaning. Its cacophonous decay, accompanied by an eldritch overture of Dragon cries.

......irrelevant.

Fate had already decided.
It would be a bitter epilogue.
The Lions were the hunted.
Victory to their adversaries.
The Red Keep was falling.
Jaime's life flashes before his eyes as the Red Keep falls... 

This was probably the hardest chapter I have had to write. None of us wanted to relive this moment again (second only to the goodbye at Winterfell). But it has to happen in order to keep true to the episode canon. Though after watching it 5000 times to accurately write it I can assure you wholeheartedly; The name of the game is Platonic. It is known. ;)

Jaime did not know what scene he had expected when he finally found his twin. He was too out of breath and wounded to consider that far ahead. But there she stood - in the centre of the map, disorientated and lost. As Cersei registered his presence, recognising the familiarity of his face, she let out a desperate sob. Jaime strode to her side and enveloped her in a consoling embrace.

Somehow, someway, in the thunderous roar of a falling city, Cersei Lannister had reverted to the scared little girl he used to know. In a time when innocence was all they shared and the world was still ripe with the promise of Summer...

Cersei had suffered badly with night terrors, her unhinged self able to conjure up any number of monstrosities even from that early age. They manifested themselves in her dreams at night. She would wake up shrieking, flailing at her blankets like they were sent to snare her. A slick sheen of perspiration coating her skin. In these hours of darkness Jaime would comfort his twin. He would hold her close and tell her how everything would be alright. It didn't matter. It was just a dream. He would soothe her to sleep with his patience and kind words and she would only settle when he was near.

In the years that followed - when Cersei's suggestions for their time spent together became increasingly less wholesome - they had been caught by one of their mother's ladies. An immediate end was put to their shared sleeping quarters and a guard was stationed outside Cersei's door.
The brutality of it marred Jaime as he was forced to listen to her scream for him each night, with no one to settle her fraying psyche.

In her adult years Cersei would refute it, considering herself a pillar of strength when compared to the weakness of her twin brother.
She maintained that Jaime was lost without her and didn't know how to function if she wasn't by his side.
But in truth, it was the opposite – Cersei had always needed him more.
Their forced separations had been detrimental to her damaged, hardened heart.
Jaime had merely learnt from her reliance. The idea that she became vulnerable without him, drove him to stay near.
He was the strong one....not Cersei. And it was especially true now.

In his arms she trembled.
He moved his hand to the side of her head, stepping back to look at his sister, this poor frightened soul.
All defiance and will stripped from her with a dragon's cries.
Reduced to a weeping puddle, isolated and alone, needing her twin to rescue her.
What if Bronn had brought her his head? What then? He almost smiled at the irony.
But she was too fragile. Too shattered. Queen Cersei Lannister.
Tears cascaded down her cheeks, her cold blooded persona scattered to the four winds.

“You're hurt.”
“It doesn't matter.” He shook his head. She needn't concern herself with it now.
Cersei's hands came away from him covered in blood. “You're bleeding.”
Jaime just kept staring at her. His fractured mirror reflection.
She had hired someone to kill him, but now she cared. She would always be a conundrum to him.

Large chunks of stone rained down mere metres from where they stood, snapping Jaime back to the present.
The imminent danger they were facing.
He ushered Cersei away, leading her through the arches and back the way he had come.

* * *

Deep within the crypts of the Red Keep, amidst the dragon skulls and falling debris Jaime pulled Cersei hurriedly along.
“This way.” He coughed. The dusty air filling his lungs. He breathed heavily with exertion, inhaling more of the choking atmosphere.
Sporadic collapses from the roof made navigating the dim tunnels an especially perilous task.

They approached his planned exit route, only to discover the way already sealed off.
Jaime's heart immediately sank through the floor.
He left Cersei standing in the clear whilst he checked the other passageways.

Futility filled him as he discovered them in worse condition that the previous.
The bricks climbing to the top of the archways without a gap or breach. Sealing them in their tomb.
He climbed the pile, ensuring he had exhausted every possibility - but there was to be no deliverance from this sentence.
Jaime hung his head, realising his defeat. Taking deep breaths as despair and resignation settled over him like a cloud.
Knowing – he would never return to Brienne on Tarth as promised.
I'm sorry, my wench.
I tried to save them like you asked.
To be the man you see me as.
One worthy of you.
And I longed to tell you....

“I want our baby to live.” Cersei's voice had an unstable edge, she too grasped the hopelessness of their situation.
“I want our baby to live.” Frantic desperation overtook her in an instant.
“I want our baby to live.”

There was only one responsibility he had now. The only thing left for him to do.
He returned to Cersei's side and clutched her comfortingly to him as she began to earnestly beg.
“I don't want to die Jaime. Please don't let me die.”
“It's all right.” Jaime tried to pacify her fraught nerves.
“Please don't let me die.”
“It's all right.”
“I don't want to die.”
His sisters pleas were heartbreaking but he was rendered powerless.
Jaime could do nothing to forestall their shared fate.
He searched for words to ease her passage, to know how to calm her as more portions of ceiling fell around them.

In his mind came a memory – Fortitude. His first mount.
A beautiful six hand tall steed who was his pride and joy. Fiesty and full of fire. The best type of horse for a knight.
Jaime had adored him. He trained with him daily and they became the best of friends.
The bond between owner and beast.
Together, they became the envy of every other young Lord.
Until one fateful afternoon, when they were being instructed in joust by Casterley Rock's Master at Arms.

To this day Jaime still wasn't certain how it had happened. A misplaced rock, an errant pothole or simply the hands of the Gods.
However it eventuated, Jaime was propelled from the saddle and Fortitude broke his leg.
Often when he heard a horse whinny in pain it brought him back to that moment, his coming of age.

“You must be a man now....he needs to be put out of his misery.”
Tears had streamed down Jaime's face, as she shook his head violently, refusing to look at his downed friend.
“He is in pain! Do you want him to suffer?” The Master at Arms had grabbed him by both sides and turned him around.
“Do you want him to die kicking and fighting?!”
It had forced Jaime to see beyond himself and his own anguish. “No.” He had sniffed.
“Look him in the eye. Hold him still, keep him calm. Speak soothing words to him. If anything, in his last moments he will know he was loved.
And that is all anyone can really ask for as they leave this world.”
Jaime had done it. He calmed Fortitude and stayed with him right until the end.
It was after that he had stopped naming his horses.

Cersei was much the same at this point. Melting away into hysteria. Fear of the end.
Looking to her beloved brother to work miracles and make it all better.
As if his will alone could shift solid stone.
“Just look at me...” Jaime encouraged. “Look at me.”
Cersei clung to him, panic had her in its grips. “Not like this. Not like this. Not like this.” She repeated, spiraling to a dark fearful place.
Jaime turned her head towards his face. “Look... Look... Look me in the eye.”
Cersei’s gaze darted in wild terror, eyeing the crumbling building around her.
Jaime became more forceful. “Don’t look away. Don’t look....Look at me! Just look at me.”
Her held her face in place just as he had done with his horse, all those years ago.
He now knew what to tell her. The one thing she wanted and needed to hear from him.
“Nothing else matters.” Her mantra for them. “Nothing else matters.”
Cersei’s own words from another time repeated. “Only us.”
The proportion of truth in them was immaterial. It would bring her peace.
He stroked her cheek as she quieted and stilled, watching her bottom lip quiver.
She caressed his beard and he nodded to let her know this was the end.

They pressed their noses together, a platonic sign of mutual affection they had done as children.
A twin gesture, solely theirs.
Acceptance of how they had grown apart but still managed to come together.
In another life, perhaps they all could have worked it out.
A normal dynamic. Cersei a sister.
His Lady Knight the owner of his heart.
_Brienne - it will always be yours._

Jaime heard an ominous rumbling reverberating behind him.
The last strains of their lives that were.
He wrapped Cersei in a protective embrace as the Keep devoured them.
Like ants out of woodwork they came.  
Materialising from alleyways and hovels. Shells of where buildings once stood.  
Ofttimes it is the selfish who survive.

Well that had always been his motto.  
He pulled the cork from the stolen flask with his teeth, spitting it across the ash covered lane.  
One of his associates approached, stepping over the downed body of a Lannister soldier.  
“Ay! Aren't ya gonna get in on 'dis then?” The corpse was already stripped of anything truly valuable.  
Several more cadavers lay sprawled on the road behind, his rag-tag band of thieves combing over them searching for anything of value. He took a swig and regarded the dim-witted cut-purse.  
“I 'ave a bigger haul in mind.” His eyes were trained on a spot in the distance, the exact point the dwarf would emerge from.  
The armed forces of the Dragon Queen were already assembling for an address. The defences distracted.  
That would be their chance.

He had trailed the little man in shadow and stealth. Stepping lightly to avoid detection.  
The coating of ash and silt masking his footsteps. It had been easy.  
All those archways and alcoves. Only once had the dwarf bothered to check behind him and that was when he had already led him to the hidden stairwell.  
If anyone would know the bitches final resting place it would be her brother.  
Then there was that tantalising rumour.... His sources had informed him (whilst holed up in a stairwell waiting for the black beast of death to fly over) that the Kingslayer had been spotted entering the city.  
Now that was truly interesting.

He snapped to attention as the tiny figure appeared.  
Covered in dust and debris.  
The Imp brushed off his clothes and wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand.  

*Jackpot.*

He watched the wretched creature scurry off, joining the others to hear the Mad Dragon's victory speech. But he didn't give a fuck.  
Tossing the flask aside, he wiped his mouth on his leather sleeve and whistled to the others.
“Any of ya interested in lootin’ a toff or two?”
Only a couple raised their heads. The others giving him a look like he’d gone crazy.
Fine. The five of us’ll do.

He wished he didn't need them. But he had seen the obstacle with his own eyes.
That was when following the little fella had come to a grinding halt.

He beckoned them over into a huddle.

“What toff?”
“This had better be good.”
“There's 'eaps of corpses out there!”
“How much are we talking?”

He couldn't take their shit. “Oi! Shut up the lot of ya or I'll shut you up for good. Ya know what's up there?” He pointed to the Red Keep. “Ruins of a palace. Ya know who's in there?” A menacing grin. “The Bitch Queen's dead body.”
“What's that good for? Unless she was wearing jewellery but we dunno that.”

He clunked that idiot over the back of the head.
“It's who's witha that counts. People been telling me, the Kingslayer was in the city.
People saw 'im come in, but ain't nobody said he got out.
And ya know what he's got? A solid gold hand.”

Their eyes lit up. “One hand for all of us?”
“Imagine what its worth. Even divvied amongst us five its more than we'd get in years of lootin’.”
“What makes ya think he's in there?”
“They didn't call her brotherfucker for nothin’!” Laughter erupted.
“We'll take the bodies as well....me guess is our new Queenie would pay nice for proof of her dead enemies. Probably feed 'em to that ugly pet of hers.”

Eager nods of agreement all round. He had 'em.
The dumb cut-purse spoke first. “Lead the way then.”

* * *

Down the winding staircase they filed. Brandishing blazing torches they had pilfered from the sconces on the walls.
He guided them down to the anteroom, where the bricks obstructed their passage. Piling floor to ceiling with the exception of a small gap made by a very tiny man.
This was why he needed the help of these lackwits.
“What now?”
“We dig.”
“It'll take forever.”

“Just enough to get through. Up 'der.” He pointed to the gap already made by the Imp. “When we get to the other side and find 'em, then we will figure out howta get'm back.”
It didn't take long to widen the pre-existing hole. Mighty decent of the little fella.
He was feeling very pleased with himself. This plan was brilliant.

One by one they passed into the crypts. “Aight now spread out. Let me know if ya find em.”
The place was spooky. Giant dragon skull heads staring at them.
What kind of people were these toffs? Keepin' somethin like that? Give me gold anyday.
Speaking of which....

“Found em!” Moronic cut-purse again. Maybe he was getting slightly more intelligent. A groan.
“And they're buried.” Or....not.
“How didja think they died?” He was getting impatient. “Start moving bricks.”
They weren't that covered up anyway. The brother had been kind enough to start the work for them.
One of the other looters made a move for the gold hand. He quickly blocked him off.

“Whaddya think you're doing? We're in this together. Back to work!” Bloody thieves.

There was a simple rule to be in his racket – he was the only one who ever carried steel.

A sword on one hip, a dagger in his belt.

That didn't mean they couldn't conceal their own blades, but it was a risk he wouldn't take if he was them.

He was their leader for a reason and had killed many before him to get there.

“Hey boss! Where do you think this goes?” The youngest of their party waved him over with his torch.

“Any of you touch the hand, you'll find it shoved up your arse!” He walked to inspect the find.

Another exit. Once again blocked off with floor to ceiling bricks.

But - the one flaw in his scheme was how they were going to get the hand and bodies out of the castle without being caught.

Or robbed by another party. He looked back at the bitch queen and the sisterfucker. They had been heading somewhere....

“Aight listen up! We are gettin' out of here, with those two bodies and the hand and we are going,” he pointed. “That way!”

More protests and groans. “Anyone would think you miserable bunch of bastards don't wanna be rich. Now come on! Put your back into it.”

One by one they started carting bricks away, clearing a path through the rubble.

When they broke through the top, where the layers were thinnest, he could hear the faintest rumble of the ocean. “Keep goin!”

He scrambled through to the other side and followed the stairs down.

The tunnel opened up to a cavern in the cliffside. A dead body propped up against it's rock wall.

Just beyond it lay the ocean. He walked out and smelt the salt air.

That was when he saw the dinghy. Could this get any more perfect?

“Boss! The gap is plenty big now.” The youngest thief hollered to him from inside the cave.

“You sure?” He shouted back. The sound of a set of crashing waves drowned out the response.

Ah fuck it. Turning to head back inside, the dead body distracted him.

From its stomach protruded a sword. A nice one. But it was still a weapon.....

When they all head out 'ere, that'd be easy for one of 'em to grab.

Then he wouldn't be the only one that was armed.

He didn't trust any of these cut-throats as far as he could throw 'em.

He could just toss the sword into the ocean – but it was a fancy looking piece of metalwork.

That'd be a waste.

He strode purposefully back up the stairs. “Couldn't hear ya answer!”

“Sorry boss.” The boy stood balancing on the top of the debris. The gap was large now. They didn't even have to climb that high. He met him at the top.

Two of the other three were clearing rubble on the opposite side below. They had planted their torches firmly between the bricks to illuminate the interior.

He couldn't see where the dumb-fuck was.

“Lots of the bricks just tumbled away.”

“Good.” He turned and stabbed the boy through the gut, ignoring the look of shock on his dying face.

This was HIS plan. He had no intention of sharing the spoils with anyone.

He pulled out his sword in one swift motion and the boy's body tumbled down the pile.

Landing right between the workers below. They barely had time to register what had just happened.
when he landed between them.
Slitting one from ear to ear in a single fluid stroke. Lightning quick he whirled as the other lunged
at him brick in hand - falling straight onto his waiting blade.
This was too easy. *Three down one to go.*
The stupid fella heard the commotion and came around the slight bend, nearly stepping on one of
the bodies.
He looked down at the gaping red smile opened along his comrades neck.
“Ay, what's goin' on?” *Wrong move, what a moron.*
He plunged his sword straight into the simpleton's chest, leaving it protruding from him as he
gurgled and died.
Shaking his head in disgust he sauntered across the debris ridden floor to his awaiting fortune.
Chapter Summary

Another missing scene filled in as we return to Winterfell. Brienne discovers the fate of King's Landing and her beloved....

Chapter Notes

This is my second chapter release today and there are lots more on the horizon. The more deeply I delve into Jaime & Brienne's world the more engrossed I become. They are such a beautiful couple and I love them both so much. As to their fates.... you're just going to have to trust me.

Please keep the comments coming! I do believe they make me type faster ;)

The main hall of Winterfell teemed with anxious energy. The assembled audience a melee of nervous chatter and rapidly beating pulses. Sansa sat on the dais, her head held high in pride of place. That was where she liked to be. Not sidelined to a mere supporting act behind her bastard brother and the Dragon Queen. The red haired young woman perfectly embodied her role as acting Northern Leader and reveled in her newfound power. Brienne knew her Lady would be loathe to ever surrender it.

What was the reason for this farce? Turning serious matters of state into an arena spectacle. The Lady of Winterfell had even allowed a crowd of smallfolk to gather into the back of the room. Their relationship had disintegrated. The rapport which once existed between them decayed beyond repair. The Lady Knight could never forgive Sansa for what she had done. Oath or no oath.

Brienne had spent long nights reasoning with herself. Attempting to reconcile the feelings she couldn't overcome against the person she aspired to be. Grappling with her own perspectives of vows and fealty. The exact precipice Jaime had derisively predicted years prior.

Lady Catelyn would understand. She had sworn to be her daughter's shield, upholding a mother's love for her child. But Sansa had cost Brienne her own. Exploited the oath to take away an innocent of her own flesh and blood. By the same token of maternal affection she was sure the ghost of Lady Catelyn could appreciate that she was unable to objectively continue her duty. The dishonour belonged to Sansa. Not herself.
However - disentangling yourself from a liege was not an easy task. Lady Stark still treated Brienne as her guard – but an iron wall had gone up. Sansa instinctually sensed the shift in dedication and responded in kind. The Lady of Tarth was no longer considered a confidant, reduced to another nameless shield. A mere fixture in the room.

Ravens had arrived the previous evening. That much Brienne knew. Her heart had leapt into her throat at the sight of them. Regardless, she had tried her hardest not to appear overtly eager for information as she approached the strategy room where the discussions were being held. Lady Sansa stopped her in the hall. “I am in no danger from my brother...you may wait outside until I emerge.” She closed the door firmly in her sworn shield's face. Banished her from acquiring the knowledge she most desperately required. The only remedy which could alleviate her restless nerves.

Jostling her way through the throngs of spectators, Brienne was as uninformed as the rest of the room. Caught up in this mummers performance, she was set to discover the fate of the kingdom along with everyone else. They had waited so long for news it was nearly overdue. The Lady Knight finally sat in her allotted place at the side table and held her breath. Surrounded by the remaining nobles and dignitaries of the North, she bade herself be calm.

She didn't know what she expected to hear. Her mind tried to prepare herself for the worst. Even if Jaime succeeded – the news the raven bore would be catastrophic. His entire plan was reliant upon his enemies believing him deceased. But still..... Brienne summoned up an impassive expression. Years of practice projecting a countenance of stone. Even when things hurt. An unattractive girl learns to conceal her emotions from a young age. She must be impenetrable, lest she betray the innermost beatings of her heart.

Bran was wheeled into place beside his sister, the cue she had been waiting for. Sansa rose from her high seat and the room hushed. The nobles leaning forward in their seats, eager to learn how the dice had fallen. Lady Stark took a deep breath, her blue eyes slowly moving to encompass the entire room. She held them rapt to attention, savouring her power. She thrived upon it now, as though their veneration sustained her. “My Lords, Ladies and citizens of the North. The wars in the South have been decided and won.” She paused for effect or perhaps just to build suspense. “House Lannister has fallen. They no longer hold the Iron Throne.” Excited murmurs erupted. Brienne's blood raced in her veins, pumping faster. Sansa raised her hands for silence. “The Dragon Queen....has also fallen. She no longer is a claimant to the Seven Kingdoms.” Shock reverberated throughout the room. This is a.....relief. Brienne could not help but interpret it this way. Jaime would always be a marked man to the Targaryen Queen. If she controlled the Iron Throne, it would make their future more difficult.

One of the Northern Lords cleared his throat. They were keen for more details. “How my Lady?” “Her death came not long after the successful sack of King's Landing. The Targaryen forces were victorious. As to the particulars of her untimely demise – I have no further information at this point
in time.”
“And the Lannister Queen?” Another highborn. Brienne held her breath and forced herself to count to ten slowly.
“Former Queen Cersei had sought refuge in the Red Keep during the invasion. The Dragon ensured the building was rased almost to the ground.”
Sansa continued to survey the room, her gaze lingeringly slightly on Brienne as she spoke the next sentence. “Cersei Lannister, accompanied by her twin brother Jaime Lannister were crushed to death attempting to flee.”

Brienne's heart lurched excruciatingly against her chest. She felt her lungs constrict. Her invisible emotional armour obscured her pain from the view of others.

“The future of the Seven Kingdoms and the North will be decided at a summit. The remaining Lords and Ladies from all corners of the Kingdom will be in attendance....”
Brienne could no longer hear her. The blood rushed too loudly in her ears.

*Crushed.*
*How can that be misinterpreted?*  
*How can it be faked?*

“......my brother and I will be travelling South with a retinue of Northern allies.”
She needed to get out of this hall. It was too stifling to bear. Pure torture.  
Her shield of supposed nonchalance was slowly suffocating her.
Chapter Summary

A follow on from last night's chapter...Brienne processes the news of Jaime's death

Chapter Notes

I really think that the show glossed over the realistic emotions that the characters would have. I know they didn't have the time to exhibit them all but there was many a reaction that went overlooked. They lost their humanism by not showing loss, grief etc and it came across detached.
To correct this wrong I really needed to explore how Brienne would handle the news of Jaime's death.

In case you haven't noticed, I very much submerge myself in their feelings. Lol <3

Concealed within the privacy of the stable walls, Brienne absentmindedly brushed straw from her horses mane.
The creature stood placidly, clueless as to the reason behind its mistresses attentions.
Its eyes did not pry, its lips did not question. It just remained still as she went about her work.

She had smoothed the same patch of fur over and over again.
Her hands moving of their own accord without conscious direction.
Her mind and heart far, far away from Winterfell and the stable.
Buried beneath the rubble of King's Landing and the Red Keep.

She could see it so clearly, she could almost smell it.
The dust. The ashes.
It choked the air. It stung her eyes.
That must be the reason for her blurred vision...

“My Lady....” It was Podrick. His tone was soft as he approached with caution.
Brienne did not turn around to face him. She quickly swallowed around the lump in her throat.
“What is it Podrick?” She tried to sound composed but her voice came out forced and harsh instead.
“Why did you not summon a stablehand My Lady? Surely you....” Pod struggled to find his words.
“.....don't want to be doing that right now.”
“Being able to take care of your mount is an important part of knightly duties.”
She found a tangle in the horses mane and began unravelling it with her fingers.
“Many times on the road it will be just you and your horse.” The burr was well and truly stuck.
“When it's just the two of you – you have no-one to rely on but each other.”
She obsessed over the knot, her arms becoming increasingly unsteady.
“You learn to depend. No matter what you have to stick together.
Should never be allowed to part.”
“Why are we no longer talking about the horse are we Ser?”
In a fit of frustration she tore out the matted clump. The horse whipped its head around in pain.
“You're sorry.” She soothed, rubbing it's neck. “I'm so sorry.”

Podrick's expression was all empathy.
He opened and closed his mouth, finding the courage to speak.
“For what it's worth...he did love you My Lady. I...I know he did. Everyone could see it. I don't know why he left.”
“It hardly matters now.” Her voice was scarcely a whisper.
She leaned her forehead into the horses mane and took deep steadying breaths.

“Ser...?”
“Can I be alone Podrick? Please.”
“Yes, My Lady.”

As soon as he exited her legs buckled. The horse propping her up.
She rubbed its back affectionately. “We have to be strong. We knew this was coming.”
It didn't make the ache any less. Nor the vision of the smoking rubble.

*Jaime is dead.*
The words were more painful than a thousand sword wounds.
Made the blows from the pommel feel like a mere bump.

*Jaime is dead.*
Brienne banished the tears welling in her eyes.
She had to get used to hearing it.
Saying it.

*Jaime Lannister is dead.*
The Kingslayer is dead.
*Ser Jaime is dead.*
*My Jaime is...*

*My Jaime....is in Tarth.*
He has to be.
*I promised I would tell him.*
Brienne brushed her hair into place, noting that it was growing ever so slightly longer. She wondered if she should have it cut. The summit was today, along with Lord Tyrion's trial and she was invited to represent Tarth. Her father had not come, though this came as no surprise. Lord Selwyn had let her be their spokeswoman for years and had become quite reclusive in his old age. She could only surmise this is what came from living on an island, disconnected from the mainland. The Lady Knight was secretly glad that he had stayed away - someone had to be home to receive Jaime. Let her handle the matters of state in the Dragonpit.

The journey down the King's Road had been the longest in Brienne's life. One would think the horrors of what she and Jaime had endured on their trek through the Riverlands would exceed it – but no. Thanks to Jaime's interventions she had been spared the worse aspects of that terrible situation and Brienne had slowly come to regard it as the quest where they forged the foundations of their connection. Without their shared experiences, they most definitely never would have been.

The idea of remaining a lonely soul, never having encountered Jaime was a tragedy. That in a distant shallow world there dwelt a Golden Lion whom she would never meet and judged abominably by his reputation. And he would have continued to exist as a lackey for his sister, despised and spat upon, weaving his webs of lies to convince the world nothing really mattered to him. They had crossed paths for a reason.

Brienne lovingly stroked Oathkeeper's pommel, inspecting her blue armour. When she donned it, she felt as though enveloped by him.

The Lady of Tarth had scarcely spoken in the last few weeks. Having nothing to say and finding it all too much to bear. She had always been a silent person, so no great change was noted. Only Podrick seemed aware of her shift in spirits but he was insightful enough not to draw attention to it. Brienne passed her days going through the motions of knightly life. She spent her nights snatching broken sleep interrupted by haunted dreams.

When they had first left Winterfell, the frost still clung heavily in the air, coupled with occasional flurries of snow. On the road - when she finally drifted into an exhaustion fueled slumber - her night visions ran rampant. She would sit up not an hour later, cold air constricting her lungs and sweat soaking her tunic. Ultimately she caught chill and every struggle she had previously faced intensified threefold.

Her sleep patterns worsened, fevered hallucinations leaving her unable to determine fantasy from reality. What few coherent moments she grabbed were spent terrified that during her delirious state she
would call out for Jaime and give the entire game away.
The only benefit to ill health was that it brought isolation, giving her an excuse to be solitary.
By the time they passed the Neck, the air was growing warmer and Brienne's constitution was fortifying.
She was keen to close the chapter on the whole sorry ordeal.

Yet - nothing could have prepared her for the sight which greeted them when they arrived at King's Landing.
The confronting scope of the ruinous city a shock to each of them.
The Northern party had stood for some time, taking it all in. Bereft and lost for words.
Her stomach had sunk and she involuntarily shivered.
Devastation didn't begin to cover it.
Horrendous an understatement.
Abhorrent merely scraping the surface.
The Dragon Queen's true capabilities stared them in the face.
Brienne was ashamed to have ever known her, conversed with her. Fought alongside her.

Sansa had spoken first, battle hardened and ever goal-oriented. Ushering them on matter of factly.
When they finally forced their legs to move, things went from bad to appalling.
Everywhere Brienne turned, there was more evidence of slaughter.
She couldn't imagine the terror of what had unfolded here.
What it would have been like to live in that moment of carnage.
But Jaime does.

Then they reached the Keep....or what was left of it.
Brienne had stood, stock still. Pulling air deep into her chest and expelling it out again.
Blue eyes glassed over. How could anyone survive this?
Her hands began to tremble. A physical manifestation of how she was feeling.
She tried to stop them but she couldn't.
Podrick appeared by her side, blocking her tremors from view. He smiled sympathetically at the Lady Knight.
Her bottom lip quivered. She clenched her jaw in response.
She wanted to search, she wanted to look....where had it happened? Where was he?
How did they know he was gone....

“Come on, My Lady Ser.” Podrick encouraged, pulling her away from her downward decline.
He used that ridiculous title for her on purpose. Pod knew better than that by now.
He was just trying to create a distraction.

Once inside it had been a flurry of business with talk of nobles arriving from all corners of the Seven Kingdoms, the meeting set for high noon the next day.
It would be a curious assortment if the rumours were true. A notable absence of liege lords and the big names who had been the decision makers in Westeros for generations. So many family lines had been snuffed out over the past few years.
It was a sad thought.

She had kept herself up late last night thinking soberly about what responsibility she owed to the realm.
History was in the making and she would form a part of it.
As the Lady of Tarth she wanted to make the correct decisions, yet she doubted every individual who surrounded her.
Brienne had worriedly established that when she entered the Dragonpit tomorrow she would be entirely without supporters.
That same disconcerting avenue of thought occupied her still. The Lady Knight couldn't help but draw comparisons. By contrast, the last time such a meeting occurred, she herself carried only natural trepidation. She stood with her allies on one side and on the opposing front there had been Jaime. Brienne had unknowingly possessed a position of power, where she could change the odds – and did. Acting on impulse to convince Jaime of the importance of their mission, urging him to try and turn the tides..... But today was different. There was no clear leader. No one to keep them in check. And the last living Lannister was on trial.

As far as everyone knows... She bluntly refused to think otherwise, Jaime did call her pigheaded stubborn.

The odds of incriminating yourself today were high. Brienne resolved to do what she always did best. Just stay quiet.

With that she left her room.

* * *

“Why do you think I came all this way?” Bran's monotone delivery implied so much more than the actual words he spoke. He knew all along. Brienne realised they were all just puppets in the Three Eyed Raven's pantomime. Jaime was right.

“To Brandon of House Stark, I say Aye.” And Tyrion was making it come to fruition. At first hesitant but then gaining momentum the notion was seconded, then carried across the dignitaries at the Dragonpit, each expressing their assent one by one.

Brienne sat with her eyes downcast, all the better if they couldn't read her face. These people had not seen the Starks how she had. Were oblivious to their potential for savagery. But she was cornered. Could not cast the lone vote of dissent. This wheel was not broken.

She prayed she was wrong. That the counsel relayed by this crippled boy in the Godswood was truly meant in kindness. Would tell herself he had protected Jaime by not revealing the true circumstances surrounding his fall from the tower. It was the only way she could perjure herself like this.

Brienne was the last of the nobles to speak, flicking her eyes up at the last second. “Aye.” She swallowed.

It came as little surprise when Sansa balked. Though the exchange that followed was quite scripted. Brienne recognised the signs – she and Jaime had rehearsed in a similar fashion. The Starks had prearranged this.

All too easily, the new King surrendered the North to his sister.
“All hail Bran the Broken, First of his Name, King of the Andals and First Men, Lord of the Six Kingdoms, Protector of the Realm.” Tyrion became the herald of the new era.

The assembly stood as one. “All hail Bran the Broken.”

It was done.

Chapter End Notes

I really loved analysing Brienne's actual facial expressions during the Dragon Pit scene. When you look closely, she doesn't seem to be enthusiastic or supportive about Bran's ascension at all. Her silence spoke volumes. I adore it when things in canon actually fall into place with your head canon. Reading between the lines achieves so much. ;)
Ephemeral


Evasive lucidity.
Drifting, swimming - no you couldn't call this swimming – Drowning.
Drowning in liquid fire.
How could you drown in fire?
Molten flame. Thick, intense, searing heat.
Spasm. Stop the screeching. The beast it shrieks still.
Agonising, breaking my skull.
I can still smell her burn. I will never forget it.
Forgive me. This must be the Seven Hells. I knew I was bound to end up here.

Blackness, blinding pain.
Warped voices. Droning, I can hear you.
I'm still in here. Trapped in this cerebral fog. Am I?
If I could find my way out....I can't it was blocked.
No, don't touch me. Don't make me move.
I'm leaden. Perhaps I have no body. Why are you doing this?

Nausea. Waves. Stop the rocking.
The throbbing. A head should not have a pulse.
Impact, shudder. Over and over again.
With every slight movement it repeats.
I have paid for my crimes, end the suffering.
Just make it stop.
I'm dying.
I can't be dying, I'm already dead.

Liquid again. Different.
Milkier. How do I know that?
If I can taste then I'm not.....
The darkness is rising again.
It hurts too much to fight.
Brilliant rays of sunlight filled the garden with its golden warmth. Melting drifts of lingering snow. Liquifying the white crystals into fresh water. They slowly trickled away, taking with them the last vestiges of the terrible winter. Almost insignificantly they faded into yesterday. A heart did not let go so easily.

Brienne sat on a decorative bench, letting the sunshine soak into her face and hair. Willing it to reach deep within and warm her core. It glinted off the Valyrian steel of the greatsword resting across her lap. She tenderly ran a cloth up and down its length, marvelling as the light bounced off its metallic edges and illuminated the deep rubies in the pommel. She treated it with the same adoration as she would Jaime himself, if he sat before her in this moment. In her mind the sword would always be an extension of him. She was quiet as ever. Introspective and thoughtful. Biding time between now and her future to come. Westeros was settling. Her opportunity could not be far ahead.

“My Lady.” She raised her head to see Tyrion approaching. His voice gentle so as not to startle her. The newly appointed Hand of the King. They had not spoken directly since the banquet at Winterfell. If felt like eons ago. “Lord Tyrion.” He came closer to inspect what she was doing. She saw him study the sword intently, no doubt noting the Lannister colours and Lions head emblazoned upon it. Brienne looked at him questioningly.

“Does it have a name?”
“Oathkeeper.”
“A fine name. Your idea?”
“I was allowed to name it. But I chose it for him.”
There it was. She had said it. Addressed the real unspoken name between them. Tyrion inhaled sharply at the mention of his brother. “He gave it to you?”
“Yes.”
“When?”
“Long ago.”
“Did father know?”
“I think not.”
Tyrion smiled. “Nice to know I wasn't the only rebel in the family.”
Brienne did not alter her countenance, continuing to tend to her sword.
Then a fearful thought seized her. “It is mine.” She said suddenly.
Tyrion regarded her with curiosity. “I tried to return it but....” She swallowed. “Ser Jaime would not have it. He was very insistent that it belongs to me.”
Sympathy filled the Hand's eyes. “I'm not going to try and take it from you.” His tone was kind.
Brienne reprimanded herself, she had let her feelings show.
Tyrion cleared his throat. “I had actually been hoping to speak with you but....” He glanced around the garden, at the attendants who flitted through the archways and side alleys. Builders still carrying out repairs and restorations. Covering up the terrifying evidence of dragonfire. “....perhaps somewhere more private.”
She sheathed Oathkeeper and stared at him, her expression hard. “I will not come to your chambers. It would be unseemly.”
“Right you are. Perhaps in one of my meeting rooms? A perfectly adequate place for a private conversation...without sullying a reputation.”
Did she detect a note of mockery? If memory served, Tyrion had lacked a certain appreciation for her high-minded virtue.
She nodded once.
“Is tonight convenient?”
“As you wish Lord Hand.”
“Very well. Until tonight.”

Brienne wasn't entirely sure what she had just agreed to. But she possessed so many burning questions.
Perhaps Tyrion was the only person she could ask.
She didn't know if he could be trusted. He was a Lannister - but Jaime loved his little brother dearly. She knew Tyrion was clever and had already proven himself to be insightful, in just those few short phrases. *That is dangerous.*
She would have to tread carefully but at this stage the answers were worth the risk.
Besides, maybe there was more than one person in the city who had been forced to wear their loss on the inside.
Insecurities

Chapter Summary

Brienne & Tyrion have a long overdue meeting.

Chapter Notes

Another conversation I wish we'd seen.
Especially given Tyrion's unshakable belief that Jaime chose Cersei. (Which I will never understand?!)
Something to link A to B and span the leaps of plot in the final episode.
Also a dynamic I really wanted to explore.
The more I think about it, the more they would have made very interesting in-laws.

A mighty oak table occupied the majority of the room. The rest of the furnishings were sparse to nonexistent. Assorted piles of documents were piled high alongside wooden boxes which clearly housed more important articles. They had been hastily pushed to one side, making room for their meeting. A carafe of wine and several goblets sat on a tray, close within Lord Tyrion's reach. By her standards the room would be classified as a generally organised state of disarray.

"Welcome My Lady or should I say Ser Brienne." The Lord Hand rose from his chair to greet her.
"Thank you for coming at such short notice."
Brienne nodded as they stood and regarded each other. They made for quite the awkward spectacle. She positively towered over him.
"Right. I think we best get you a chair before I suffer a crick in my neck." Tyrion was jovial trying to break the ice and lighten the mood.
She wasn't sure how to respond. People had been making a mockery of her height her whole life, she didn't feel the need to encourage the practice. For either of them.
"It is alright. I can seat myself."
He gestured for her to go ahead and she pulled out the chair opposite his own. They both sat. Tyrion puzzled over her, trying to figure out her thoughts whilst Brienne remained unreadable.
"Right, well – would you care for a wine?" He began pouring two glasses.
"No. Thank you."
"More for me then." The silence stretched between them.
It seemed to irk Tyrion who shifted uncomfortably in his seat.
Fear of reticence. She observed. Clearly a familial trait.

Predictably the Lord Hand was the first to speak again.
"You really are quite a severe woman aren't you?"
"Matter of opinion."
Tyrion sighed. "I'm not your enemy you know, if I was would I have called this meeting?"
"This is King's Landing, anything is possible."
"All too true I'm afraid. But why would I wish you any harm?" He leaned forward on the table.
"I never realised – how close you were to my brother. I knew you accompanied him back from the
Riverlands but until I heard you defend him, at his trial. I had no idea what the two of you had gone through - together.”

“He never told you?”

“No.” He reclined in his chair - contemplative. “That says a lot.”

“I didn't tell anyone either.”

“But you don't have siblings.” He clearly paid attention during the drinking game.

“Probably for the best.” She replied. Tyrion raised an eyebrow awaiting an explanation. “Mayhaps siblings are the problem.”

He grinned triumphantly at her. “You mean Cersei.” He sipped his wine. “She was a problem for me too you know.”

“I didn't say that.”

“You didn't have to.”

Brienne quietened again. Tyrion was a far better game player than she.

The Lady Knight pushed herself up from the table. “This was a mistake.”

“No! Don't. Please, sit back down.” He raised both hands in surrender. “Don't go running off like you did at the banquet. My thoughts often get the better of me and the wine makes them tumble out of my mouth, it is a problem. One I must resolve. But I honestly wanted to talk to you.”

She sighed. “What about?”

“Jaime.”

Brienne lowered herself slowly back into the seat.

Tyrion smiled to himself and nodded. “I suspected so. You want to speak of him as much as I do.”

“What is it that you wanted to say?” She struggled to remain aloof.

“Just that...I wanted to thank you.” Her eyes widened in surprise. “Jaime meant the world to me. Everything a big brother should be.” His voice became choked. “Cersei was....a poison in his life. One he was addicted to. I never got the chance to see Jaime away from her. Removed from her toxic fog.” Tyrion inhaled and exhaled deeply. “The Jaime I saw in Winterfell, I had never seen before. He was happy. He smiled, he laughed. He fell all over himself like a teenage fool. That was you. It didn't take me long at all to piece together that you were the reason.”

He was so sincere, Brienne couldn't look directly at him.

“He lit up around you. And you around him.”

“Is that all?” It was paining her to be harsh but she didn't know how else to react.

Tyrion shook his head. “I'm sorry for the way it ended.” That floored her, she returned her gaze to his face. “I saw it coming – they were inseparable from each other. Cersei had sunk her talons so deeply into him. He could never truly escape. She would always have pulled him back.”

He looked saddened. Brienne's heart started to bleed at his words. “I am sorry that you got hurt in the process. Tangled between them. It's not your fault. You were doomed to fail. But you loved him. And I could see that. I'm so sorry you weren't enough.”

Every word was like a dagger straight to her chest. It must have shown. “I don't say this meaning to be cruel – just for Jaime, there was never going to be anyone but Cersei. And I don't want you, spending your life, mourning and recriminating yourself for a situation you could not have overcome.”

Her mind screamed. Half of her wanted to argue with him. Half of her wanted to cry. The inner voice belonging to her self doubt told her Tyrion was right. Her heart spoke otherwise.

*It's not true. He's wrong. Only the two of you know what you shared.*

But the negative was so much easier to believe.

“.....Lady Brienne?” She didn't know how many times Tyrion must have called her name.

She blinked away the translucent film she could see forming in front of her eyes.

“Do you have any questions you want to ask me?” The Lord Hand was stepping lightly with her.

She found her voice, locked deep within her throat. “What...what do you know of his final
moments?”
“I know a lot. More than anyone else knows.”
“You were on trial for treason, for disobeying the Dragon Queen. They said you released Jaime from her imprisonment.”
“I did.” He confessed plainly. “I sent him in to the Red Keep to rescue Cersei and their child. I armed him with knowledge of a hidden passageway and had a dinghy ready for their escape across the narrow sea. In return, I asked that he ring the bells to signal the city's surrender.”
“The Bells rang.”
“They did. Although I can never prove it with certainty, I have faith in the word of my brother. I know he kept his pledge to me.” Brienne knew it as well, Jaime would have tried to save the city from a fiery grave for a second time.
“And the rest of the plan?” Her inner war waged on.
Was he really going to leave with Cersei and begin again? Her diffidence tormented her relentlessly.
No – I must trust Jaime. I was the one who had him promise to save them.
“After Daenerys had won, I walked the Red Keep. I needed to know. I was so worried about them.” Tyrion's eyes welled with tears.
Oh shit. What was coming?
“I followed the route I told Jaime to take. The passageways were sealed with mountains upon mountains of bricks.” His chest heaved. “I could barely squeeze through to enter the crypts.”
“And?” Her voice was scarcely a raw whisper.
“I found them. I found Jaime first. His gold hand and arm was...just lying there, jutting out of the debris.” Tyrion's voice broke. “There they were. My brother and my sister. I uncovered their faces, their chests. I had to see them one last time.” He swiped at his eyes.
Brienne couldn't comprehend what she was hearing.
Tyrion was telling her he saw their bodies. Her whole body shook violently where she sat. An eruptive, quaking vessel of bottled emotion. She could only hope it wasn't visible.
“Take what comfort you can....he died how he always wanted to. In the arms of the woman he loved.
His love for her was always the death of his reason."
She thought she was going to be sick.
For weeks she had told herself it wasn't real. It was the plan.
It still couldn't be real. It still had to be the plan.

“Do they...” Her voice was foreign. Broken and scratchy. “Have a resting place?”
“I am so ashamed. There is more pain to be had in this tale.....”
She gaped at him in disbelief. How could it get worse?
“Looters, must have watched me. Followed my trail into the crypts. I was taken into custody shortly after finding them.” Another sigh. “With the Dragon Queen's undoing and all the opposing forces it took weeks for anyone to get down there to them. By the time they did, it was too late. Their corpses had been burnt. The Lannister's were not loved by the lowborn.” Brienne was horrified.
“The only solace seems to be that the grave robbers waged war amongst themselves. Four bodies were found, impaled with swords and a slit throat. They killed each other inside the crypt after they had cleared an exit. The dinghy was long gone. It isn't surprising. The place was apparently teeming with washed up Ironborn.” A small smile. “They found Euron Greyjoy's body too. With Jaime's sword shoved through him.”

Tyrion alighted from his seat, walking over to one of the wooden boxes on the table. He picked it up reverently and carried it back to his chair.
“Sometimes, justice serves itself. We were able to recover Jaime's sword – Widow's Wail – from
the pirates gut. And this...” he slowly opened the box. “From the body of one of the thieves.” Tyrion gently lifted out a solid gold hand. “Now we know what they were fighting over.” Brienne’s breath caught in her throat. Her mind desperately raced to find an avenue of thought that would make this all go away. To reach a conclusion that found Jaime alive and well on Tarth.

She stood. With all her might she forced herself to speak. “Thank you for sharing this with me.” The Lady Knight turned to leave. “Wait.” She halted, cringing at his request. Brienne could feel the water pooling in her eyes. She couldn't hold on much longer. “You have been incredibly stoic Ser Brienne, throughout this whole ordeal. Perhaps I misjudged and if I did I apologise. I had been, under the impression that you were in love with Jaime.”

Her White Knight had said he didn't want his younger brother to be included in his plans. This was why Tyrion was under so many erroneous misconceptions. How he had it all so very wrong. She was loyal to Jaime. Brienne had come this far, pretending to be a woman indifferent to his loss.... Pivoting to face Tyrion, she was stolid and sure. “Your brother left me at Winterfell to return to your sister. He betrayed the North and he betrayed me...” A single tear broke free, running a solitary salt river down her cheek. “And your tears, betray you My Lady.” Tyrion called her out. She swallowed past the lump in her throat.

The Lord Hand rounded the table to stand before her, completely in earnest. “An offer is going to be made to you. The King and I have talked at length about it. The posting if you accept will be the achievement of a lifetime. History making in the Six Kingdoms....” He reached up to place a hand on her arm. She shied away, the contact unwelcome. “Don't let your grief over my brother hold you back from this. I have every confidence that Jaime would approve. He made you the first ever female Knight in Westeros. He wanted you to succeed.” Tyrion gazed up at her, respect evident on his face. “As difficult as it is, we both have to put him behind us. It's the only way to move forward.” With these last words of wisdom, he departed, grabbing the carafe as he went.

Brienne stood immobile. Rooted to the spot. Paralysed by every word she had endured. Invaded by macabre images.

She felt as though her soul no longer inhabited her body. Tarth was her final hope.
Gamechanger

Chapter Notes

We continue on! I know this has been an angsty ride.
The show canon gave me lots of hurdles which I have to navigate in order to achieve my goal, whilst staying true to what we've seen.
There is a light at the end of this tunnel.

To those who persevere with me, it warms my heart to know you're out there! <3
Tonight I am going to post two shorter chapters.

Her summons came the next day.
Ser Brienne of Tarth had been requested to attend an audience with the King. The small hall now serving as a throne room lacked the grandeur of its precursor but was not wanting in merit. It's compact size exuded an ambience of intimacy, whilst the well lit interior put subordinates at ease. Several windows were left open and a raven conspicuously cawed from the rafters. The choice of this particular wing had not been coincidental, it's location directly beside the Godswood. Tips of the Weirwood's branches were visible from where she was positioned in front of the dais. Their new sovereign occupying his wheeled chair in place of a High Seat. Tyrion sat to one side of him, nodding in acknowledgement as she approached.

Brienne bowed, the delicacy of the curtsy continued to evade her.
“You wished to see me Your Grace.”
“Yes. It had been some time since we last spoke.” Bran addressed her in his usual methodical manner. “Did you have a chance to think about what I said?”
“I have thought on it often Your Grace.” It was the truth. But in what context he did not need to know.
“Good. I meant it.” The new King looked to Tyrion. Speaking seemed to be a drain to him.

“Ser Brienne, as you are probably aware, Sansa Stark – Queen in the North will be departing shortly. As you are her sworn sword it is our surmise that you will be leaving with her.” Tyrion paused. “Unless – another arrangement is made for your service.”
Brienne was intrigued. Returning to Winterfell to continue her role as Sansa's guard was the last thing she wanted to do. “What arrangement do you speak of Lord Hand?”
“A new position, here in King's Landing.” This is what Tyrion had alluded to the previous evening. “I am flattered that you would think of me....but I fear I do not know what it is I am being considered for?”
Tyrion looked to King Bran, this was his to say.
“Lady Commander of the King's Guard.”

Now it all made sense. Why Tyrion had spoken to her at length in preparation. This was Ser Jaime's title.

“As you are aware, it is the Highest Honour for a Knight in Westeros and the King and I both believe, very well deserved by you.” Tyrion smiled. “It is yours if you want it.”

Brienne did not know how to react. She knew she should be elated but instead she was numb.
“Your Grace I....” She stammered. “I am...lost for words.”
“Of course.” Bran's mouth twitched slightly, almost like he wanted to smile but it didn't quite form.

Tyrion prattled on. “If you accept, you will not only be the first female Knight in Westeros but the first Lady Commander. You will sit on the council with the King, other advisors and myself. You will also get an input into the appointment of the Knights to form guard under your command....”
“I know what the position entails.” She gave Tyrion a stony look.
**He should have known better.** She had spent nigh an hour in the White Sword Tower with Jaime as he ridiculed his own place in the position.
Brienne could still see the self loathing on his handsome face as he slid the White Book over to her.
That was the day he gave her Oathkeeper.

“Yes you would.” Tyrion conceded. A questioning expression overcame the King.
“It has always been your dream to be a Knight. I suppose you could cite the laws of chivalry to me without stopping to think.” The Hand was quick to gloss over their slip.
“Knightly Codes are a passion of mine. I do not deny it.” She modestly replied.
The rare sound of Bran's voice. “That's why you are suited to the Title.” He seemed quite insistent.

Brienne needed to buy herself time. “I do not wish to appear inappreciative but this is exceedingly overwhelming. May I have a moment to gather my thoughts?”
The King nodded and turned his head towards the Godswood, indicating she should take a walk in the garden.

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

* * *

The fresh air was invigorating. Deep lungfuls eased the disturbance in her mind.
**Lady Commander of the Kings Guard.**

Years ago it would be a glory she would never dare to dream.
Even being a Knight was out of her reach. Now the wheels of her ascension had been put in motion and nothing seemed to be slowing their momentum.

The Kings Guard.
Golden armour and white cloaks.
They swore to protect the King from all harm or threat.
To obey all orders, guard the Kings secrets and shield his name and honour.
They surrendered all titles and inheritances pertaining to their previous life.
And they swore to remain chaste, to take no husband and bear no children....

If Jaime was still out there, this would ruin their future.
But if Jaime was gone – it was her best option.
She couldn't make this decision on the spur of the moment.

“Your Grace....” Brienne re-entered the Throne Room.
Tyrion was deeply involved in a one-sided conversation with the King.
Instead of listening Bran had been - watching her.
“.....May I approach?” He nodded.

She humbly took a knee in front of him.
“I am deeply honoured that you wish to bestow this profound title upon me but I must respectfully ask you to grant me a request before I can accept.”
Both King and Hand leaned forward in their seats, they were listening.

“My Father, Lord Selwyn as you know, remains on Tarth. I am his sole heir. To take this position would be to relinquish my seat and will leave him without a successor. I have not seen him in many a year and I feel it would be selfish of me to embark on this new mission without his knowledge or blessing.” Brienne looked up at them.

“With your permission Your Grace I would travel to Tarth.”
Heavy lids slowly lifted. Like the raising of an iron portcullis in a fortress. Tedium, gradual, deliberate. The bleary vision which greeted him caused his head to spin, his stomach lurched. He tried to blink and focus. “There now.....he's coming back to us this time.” An elderly gentlemen stood over the – bed? Where am I? What....happen...

Jaime opened his mouth to speak but found he was parched. So dry. All he managed was a slight wheeze. “Water for him – just a few drops for the moment.” A soft wet cloth was brought to his mouth by an unseen figure, lingering just out of his peripheral vision. He went to turn his head but the movement caused a shock of pain to reverberate through his skull. The worst headache of his life. It roiled his insides.

“Easy now – no moving. We are going to have to take this slowly. Step by step.” Jaime fixed his eyes on the old man as droplets of water were dribbled into his mouth. He was so dehydrated. He wanted to take the cloth, he thirsted to suck - but it was kept teasingly out of his reach. They must be captors, tormentors. Why else are they being so cruel?

But the gent did not seem malicious. The expression etched on his weather-worn features genuinely concerned and sympathetic. Even kindly. Jaime wished he could communicate through his eyes alone. Or at least he was going to try. “You're confused. I know you must have a lot of questions. But your brain needs to rest. You are in safe hands. We have gotten you this far, we are not going to lose you now.” The elderly fellow smiled at him. “There is a rough road ahead yet. Try not to fight too hard, though I can tell you have the spirit of a Warrior. The body heals gradually and yours has been through a lot.”

What have I been through? He struggled to remember. To grasp something, anything in his grey matter that may explain his presence here. Some small recollection. He furrowed his brow in concentration. That was a mistake. Like a burning iron rod had been thrust through his temple, a searing shooting pain sliced it's way through his cranium. It was so horrific his vision blurred and he heaved involuntarily. “Turn him on his side.” He heard the old man's voice.

The agony was brutal. He vomitted bile over the side of the bedframe. Hands held him tightly, keeping him from falling. “We will have to put him under again. Wipe his mouth out. Make sure his throat is clear before lying him back down....Keep him on his side.”

Jaime could feel them working but he had gone away inside. The physical pain too much to handle. After a brief time he felt his mouth prised open and a familiar milky texture contacted his tongue. His throat was rubbed gently to encourage him to swallow. Then everything faded out.
I have done so much research in order to make his condition as realistic as possible. You know - its actually not out of the question that our man survived. It is entirely plausible.

And now its head canon in my fix-it fic. :)
The soft wind caught in her hair and nestled against her face as she stood at the bow. The sapphire waters and green hillsides of her beloved island sharpening into view on the horizon. Salt air filled her lungs and a nostalgia she thought long forgotten gripped her soul. Home. 

*If I had died in the icy North, I would never have seen it again.*

But she had lived. Jaime had hacked through numerous wights, flinging them from her and she in turn had cut through hordes of them to rush to his aid. Together they had seen another day – the dawning sun over the grey horizon. Together they had admitted their feelings – the intensity of their mutual affection more incredible than either of them could ever have hoped. And now together they would see - the first flourishes of Spring, vibrant with life.

“We're not far from port now My Lady.” The first mate informed her. She nodded and thanked him. Jaime was lucky if he had been here longer than she. Enjoying the fresh air whilst she was cooped up in a political nightmare. She had so much to tell him - The New King, word of his brother....the story of their baby. That would be a difficult one to relay, to think of the loss still pained her. But everything felt easier with Jaime by her side. Perhaps they could try again....
She was getting ahead of herself. They were not wed. Would Jaime wish to wed? She had never asked him how he felt about it. How could they get married if he had no name? She sighed. Lannisters were clever. They would come up with something.

How would her father react? Surely Jaime would have filled him in. *Oh Gods, what if Jaime has filled him in?* She cringed. Jaime's knack for storytelling wasn't exactly the type of tale her father would appreciate. Brienne settled herself down, her insides already a flutter. She felt half a girl again. She just wanted to see Jaime, hold him, never let him go.

It wasn't far away now, soon she would have all her answers and more.

* * *

Brienne scanned the dock, a perplexed expression already gracing her features. The area teemed with sailors, fishermen and the odd merchant going about their business. A bustling hive of activity.

“Welcome back My Lady.” Deferential bows and warm smiles greeted her, issued by the odd elderly civilian who remember her face. *Unforgettable for all the wrong reasons.* This practice of greeting her soon became catching amongst the smallfolk. A crowd had gathered as the ship neared, natural curiosity and awe stopping them. It was not often a vessel bearing the royal standards docked at Tarth. The Lady Knight nodded in acknowledgment but her attentions were divided. She honestly thought Jaime would be here to greet her.

Brienne eyed the rise that led to Evenfall Hall, its mighty expanse spanning the majority of the hillsides beyond. She had sent word ahead to her father, so they would be anticipating her arrival. Calming her own anxiety she reminded herself that due to favourable winds they had made good time. Everyone was probably just taken by surprise that her landfall had come early.

An entourage of armoured guards on horseback appeared in the distance. Taking a deep breath she gripped Oathkeeper's pommel and stepped forward. As they approached Brienne realised with dismay that she didn't recognise them. Most of the fighting men she was familiar with had left with her to join Renly's ranks several years ago. These replacements were strangers to her.

Their leader lifted his helm, appraising her then checking the dock behind. *Here we go again.* They were most likely too young when she departed to be familiar with her appearance and Lady of Tarth conjured up far different images in a young man's mind. Satisfied that there were no other women present he decided it was time to speak. “Lady Tarth?” “Ser actually.” Brienne held her head high. Any doubts that she was a noblewoman soon melted away with his panicked expression. He dismounted his horse and bowed respectfully. “My apologies. I am Captain Andrew Retten. The Evenstar sent us to accompany you to Evenfall Hall. We would have been waiting to receive you at the dock but we were under the impression you wouldn't arrive until tomorrow.”

“You couldn't have known.” She put him at ease. Another guard dismounted and brought a horse around to her. The palfrey was tall, a very study looking creature of fine breeding. She was glad for it. The stablehands clearly remembered her stature well. “Is my father in good health?” “For the better part My Lady, he ages but is robust as ever.” “I have no doubt.” She mounted, keen to get moving. “Shall we be on our way?” “As you wish Lady Tarth.” Somehow the message to address her as Ser and Knight still wasn't getting through to the male
population in Westeros. It amused Brienne at least. *These things take time.* Wait until her father had to make the adjustment.

* * *

Brienne had underestimated how emotional it would be to see her father again. When she spotted him upon the High Seat she was overtaken by a surge of sentimentality. She smiled broadly as he stood to greet her. “Welcome home Brienne.” They embraced briefly but awkwardly. She stood taller than even him. “It is good to see you Father. It has been too long.”

“You look well.” He inspected her appearance, taking in her masculine garb and dignified stance. It made her self conscious again and she flushed under the scrutiny. “No doubt I have aged.”

“That is true for both of us.” She had been a mere girl with untamed dreams when she'd left. An innocent maid filled with ideals. Now she was a worldly woman, a seasoned fighter who had been harshly schooled in courtly intrigue. It was a wonder he recognised her at all.

“Come daughter, we have much to discuss.” As he clasped her by the shoulder and steered her towards his meeting room, she desperately checked the hall. A few attendants and household staff had stood by to witness the reunion but there was noticeably no Jaime. Her breathing quickened.

Lord Selwyn noted her discomfort and called to her again. “Brienne.”

She followed him hesitantly.

* * *

“Now that we have the formalities out of the way.” Lord Selwyn sat opposite her in his private meeting chambers. A cup of tea rested untouched in Brienne's lap, long gone cold. They had discussed court and Westerosi politics. With each question her father asked, Brienne became more unsettled.

*He should already know this from Jaime.*

She jittered her leg anxiously having trouble keeping still. The porcelain of the cup rocked against the saucer with the movement. The Evenstar took note. “Is there something troubling you daughter?” She blinked twice at him, refocusing.

“You do not return home in years, then travel all this way under the King's standard only to show little to no interest in discussing the exact topics which you claimed in your message you wished to raise.”

“I'm sorry....I'm distracted and weary I suppose.”

“What is the cause of your distress?”

“Father....” She placed the tea cup on the desk and leaned forward in earnest. “May I ask you something, without follow up questions ensuing thereafter?”

He lifted his bushy eyebrows. “I suppose.”

She took a deep breath and held it, even as she spoke.

“Have...has there been....any strangers arrive on Tarth. A...” Brienne struggled to word the inquiry. She thought for sure Jaime would have been there smiling at her, having used her suggested phrase to win over the Evenstar.

“...a traveller. Or a displaced hedge knight...or....anyone out of the ordinary who wished to see you?”

Lord Selwyn looked at her like she had gone insane. “No Brienne. I can most assuredly state there hasn't. You are the first person, aside from the usual passing merchants, to arrive on our shores since the wars began. I have kept security on our island very tight. If any outsiders had arrived, it would have been reported to me.”
Her breath was released in a series of shuddering sobs. Her chest quaking as she felt her world crashing down. “Brienne....”

She ran. Vaulting from her chair and tearing through her childhood halls. Out through a side door into the garden. Across the grass to a pathway eaten away in the rocky hillside. Down the gravelled slope until it gave way to sand. Further, faster to the shoreline, where waves dashed against rocks and created a wall of sound. Where salt sea-spray filled the air and she could finally be alone. 

*Alone.*

*Alone forever.*

She collapsed to her knees in the sand letting out an earth shattering cry. Expelling every suppressed emotion of months gone by. It echoed off the rocks to be swallowed by the roar of the ocean. Every drop in that sea, every grain of salt and sand on that beach could not be more numerous than the tears which she shed in that moment. Clutching her stomach, wrapping her arms tightly around herself as though she could shield from this pain....But she couldn't. It was inside her. It was all consuming.

*Jaime.*

All her hopes, all their plans, all their promises were for naught. He was gone. She had held him for the last time. Spoken with him for the last time. Loved and been loved for just the briefest interlude. “Jaime.” Her chest heaved so much she thought she too should die. She genuinely wanted to.

*Know the reason why. Keep it in your heart.*

*This was my choice and I will not regret a moment of it if I die knowing you are safe.*

That was his whole purpose. So that she could live in safety. Not so she could die of grief. It was what he wanted. To throw it all away would make his loss in vain.

She lifted her head to look out at the ocean, blurred by the abundance of tears clouding her vision and tumbling down her cheeks. He had no resting place. No crypt. No ceremony. No place for her to say goodbye. Here where they had planned to meet was good as any. She would keep her promise.

“Jaime....I love you.” She hoped somehow, somehow he would hear her. “Now and forever, I will love you.”

* * *

Lord Selwyn watched the beach from his balcony. His daughter had fled their conversation in a most alarming way. Now she kneeled in the sand, just a speck in the distance. From the way she doubled over, she appeared to be in pain. Her line of questioning had been intriguing. But it had come under a pretext. She ensured that he could not enquire further. So much distance had come between them, both literal and metaphoric. He wondered if they could ever close their gap.

* * *
“Wed.” The Evenstar sat with his arms crossed. A look of steely determination on his face.

Brienne was having none of it. “That ship has sailed.”

They sat by the fireside in Evenfall Hall, the dark room lit only by the blaze and a handful of sconces on the wall. Their serious discussion regarding her future had taken it's usual turn.

“...You, yourself have stated that your standing has changed. The collective of unmarried noble Ladies is far fewer now and you have obtained respect. A suitable match would no longer be a difficulty.”

“Is this all I amount to?” The Lady Knight rose from her chair to pace the floor in front of her father. “After all I've done?” She stopped and pointed emphatically to her chest. “I stand here before you the first Female Knight in the history of the Six Kingdoms yet all you can speak of is marrying me off as if I were chattel.”

“Forgive me Brienne for not wishing out house and our homeland to become obsolete.” His tone was far from apologetic. “To pass into the hands of strangers when my daughter stands before me, hale and healthy. When many other Lords cannot attest to the same blessing. You are resilient Brienne. Would you waste that resilience to be a glorified bodyguard? Think how strong your sons' would be!”

“I told you once that I would accept no more matches and that any you placed before me would have to best me with steel. I can assure you Father for I have seen them fight firsthand, there is no man left who could do that.” Jaime entered her mind. Both hands bound yet still trying to conquer her on a bridge. His tenacity could have outshone every man in Westeros and even he had floundered against her.

“Which is why the King wishes for you to be his guard. Do not mistake me – I am not diminishing the offer or your monumental feats. Even if you were a son, I could not be prouder - but I would be offering the same advice. You are all Tarth has. Ser Brienne, the Maid of Tarth would make for a prize...” At this she began to scoff and shake her head.

Was this how she had been? Unwavering and infuriatingly obstinate? Jaime was right again. Her father's spiel continued. “.....They would be lining up to test their steel against you and win your hand.....What is so amusing?”

“You think everything stays the same. Like here on this island. You think I have stayed the same. I am much altered. I am much scarred.” As I warned you....” She didn't appreciate the inference in this phrase.

*He is asking if I've been violated. I know him well enough.*

“I am strong father. Do not underestimate me. You never did have to part with those three hundred gold dragons.” Her tone bit a little more than she intended.

“You give me precious little information to work from daughter. How am I supposed to think?” Brienne responded with only silence. She wasn't about to tell him that she very happily and voluntarily relinquished the title of Maid of Tarth to the man she loved. He would only think less of her for it and would never understand. Especially if he knew it was Jaime Lannister.

She set her mouth in a firm line. “It matters not. I will be Lady Commander of the King's Guard. I will live and die by my blade as I always wished. I'm sorry to disappoint you again. I had hoped I would proceed with your blessing.”

“What you choose by doing this Brienne is not a life but an existence!” His voice had an edge, he grew angry.

But so did she. “What would you know of life? You hide here, in your oasis choosing to ignore that which plagues the realm. Wallowing in what you lost, what you can never have. Dwelling in your many bitter disappointments the largest of which is me. But I went into the world! I have lived, I have tasted life in ways I never thought I would and I do not regret a moment of it.

So now, if I must retire into merely an existence I suppose it is a fair price to pay. For that ‘existence’ is by far preferential to becoming a brood mare for some upjumped Lord who only saw my worth after I forged a name for myself.”

“What is this side of you? I have never seen it before.”

“Then perhaps you never saw me.” She turned on her heel and stormed out.
The vessel which carried Ser Brienne to her homeland, all to swiftly carried her away again. The Lady Knight cut a lonesome figure standing upon the deck staring despondently up at the stars. A keen observer would notice that her light had gone out. The blue flames once contained in her sapphire spheres doused. Dull and lifeless. Subdued and dutiful. Lacking their passion and fervor.

But no one bar Jaime had ever bothered to look closely enough to see their spark. The vigor with which she fought and debated. Her polarising durability and fragility. Hands that could both deliver a killer blow and cradle a collapsed comrade. No one knew. No one cared. Her one claim to beauty had died with him in King's Landing. Extinguished forever in the salt sea spray at Tarth.
I'm posting an extra chapter early today as a heartening reminder that Jaime is still with us.

Weeks ago when I started writing this tale, it was before the final episode had aired. It was always my intention to have Jaime waiting for Brienne in Tarth. Then they showed the bodies. Then they made our warrior woman Lady Commander of the KingsGuard. That is something she would never dedicate herself to if she believed Jaime alive.

I was forced to adapt. It altered my course but I believe:
All roads lead to the same end, some just take longer to get there. :)
my family for generations, it is in my blood. Methods from distance cities in Essos little heard of to folks here and wisdom obtained from watching the great Maesters at work. Along with my divine purpose, I also inherited the plight of the common smallfolk. My name is not one of noble families, nor even prestigious enough to train at the Citadel. Those who have cared for you and assembled here are of a likemind. Our meagre Infirm by the Sea merely a hospice where the unseen or unwanted are taken care of. Where we find the lost souls who cling to life for a greater calling of their own. We are of ordinary standings and hence we view and treat everyone in the same light, without prejudice. Without question. For each has been sent to us for a reason.”

Ah, he's a religious zealot. Jaime would have rolled his eyes if he had the strength.

Yes, lying defenceless like a baby. That is the grand plan for me.

“I offer you this information freely as it is of little importance. This is not my story to tell. I can see you doubt me even in this moment. That perhaps you don't believe. I am not here to judge you my friend. But I do know one thing - the true question is what brought you here and the greater reason why.”

Clearly an injury brought me here. As to the rest.... He tried again in vain to locate some scrap of a memory. Something, anything.

“I know you cannot remember. Your brain is troubled. But perhaps I may offer you some sage advice - observations gathered from years of witnessing the impossible cases. The spared souls who pass through our halfway house as the bridge to their new life.”

The old man, Melj, took a deep breath. “It takes a lot to hold off the Stranger, The Many Faced God, Death. Call him what you may, he comes in many forms and he will take whom he decides. In my experience there is only one force which possesses the power to hold him at bay. Selfless sacrifice. True motive of heart. Those whom He turns and walks away from so they may achieve something seldom found in life – redemption. Those who gave of themselves freely, without thought or concern for what would become of them, all for the good of another. I look at you and I see someone who has suffered trials. From your scars I can tell you were a fighter. But before you dismiss me and my ramblings as a senile old devout – I would bid you to think.... Has there ever been a situation previously in your life where you took a selfless risk for the good of another? Where you sacrificed without a second thought or question, whether it would be worthwhile?

And if so – did the Gods reward you in ways you could not have imagined? Was the compensation worth the cost? Did you gain more than you lost? And given the choice again knowing the result, would you choose the same?”

Without hesitation Jaime's eyes searched, wanting to look at where his right hand ought to be. The Lion of Lannister had been determined that his entire purpose in life was tied to that hand. But when he had heard the wench's struggle. When they dragged her into those woods.... He shuddered still at the thought of it while Melj watched him intently. Jaime hadn't stopped to think that he would make them angry. That there may be repercussions. His sole focus had been to stop what they would do to her. Brienne. The one true good thing in his life. She herself had been the reward he never anticipated. Her respect, her friendship, ultimately her love. The shallow stupid creature he had once been would never have imagined it in his wildest dreams. Yet it was the greatest outcome. No regrets.

Given the choice again....

Take his hand. Take his arm. Hells, take the left as well. If it meant she was safe. If it meant she would come to no harm. They could have his life. He would gladly give it up.

Melj nodded, a look of knowing of his wise old face. “I can see that you have made such a trade. You don't have to tell me. It is not for me to know. Keep it within you. This is but an example of
the phenomenon I speak of....” He rose from his seat and took the rag from Jaime's mouth. “Things like this only make sense in retrospect. To move forward, you have to look behind. I can heal the trauma of your body, but not your mind or soul. That is up to you.”

The old man placed a gentle hand on Jaime's forehead. “There must be visions, trapped inside which you would rather not face. But as long as they remain, they hold you back. Find them. Confront them. Release them. Then your rebirth will be complete. Only then can you start again with renewed purpose.”

He made his way to the doorway. “I will have Darna bring you some soup. Just a little.”

Melj stopped before exiting. “I have faith in you. There is a passion driving you that has brought you this far. You will complete your journey.”

With that he left the room.
A pristine white cloak tumbled from her shoulders, billowing effortlessly behind her as she walked. Her new suit of gilded armour fit like a glove yet still somehow did not caress her in the same manner its forerunner had. She knew why. It had been difficult to place it aside.

The Lady Commander had stood her Blue armour, fully assembled in her chambers. Just like the first time she had seen it unveiled – though significantly more beaten. Each scratch and dent told a story. It now became a memento of her former life, occupying one of many vacant spaces.

She had a few of those keepsakes around. The small lion statuette she kept in the White Sword Tower. Oathkeeper near permanently affixed to her hip and if not never out of her line of sight. And a new addition.....a golden hand. Officially it belonged to Tyrion but she had asked what he intended to do with it. The Hand of the King thought it best kept out of sight, lest it wake reminders of transgressions now buried. Brienne had a suggestion and Tyrion was kind enough to grant it. A small heavy base was crafted, where the hand could fit into place at just the right angle. Now every night when she retired to her chambers (a place she had assured Tyrion no outsiders would ever be invited nor welcome), Oathkeeper was slipped securely between thumb and forefinger. Returning the Valyrian blade to its original owner. Each time she recalled when Jaime first presented it to her. The way he balanced it precariously on his hand for her to take. In the beginning it made her heartsick but now it brought a sense of completeness. A way to include him in her routine.

The White Sword Tower was an official sort of place. Sacred to the history of the Seven now Six Kingdoms. Imbued with generations of dedication and greatness. The responsibility you felt in walking it's floors could not be taken lightly. When that Cape had settled upon her, she had felt the metaphoric weight descend. But Brienne of Tarth did not greet it with resentment. It suited her well to have purpose.

Today she faced another of those duties. One she had been postponing until she felt emboldened enough to do it properly without blemishing the work of many. Now was that time. It was both miraculous and tragic that the book itself survived. Hauled up in this imposing tower. How had the black dragon's wrath taken so much but spared this piece of history? Brienne would gladly have proffered a trade.

Lovingly removing Oathkeeper from its scabbard she set her blade across the centre of the table. Thumbing its Lion Head pommel as she so often did as a method of self comfort. This would be ritualistic to her. The quill and inkwell at the ready, she seated herself and opened the massive tome.
Year after year, page after page, filled with great men and even greater deeds. Whether coloured up and inflated by the ambiguity of myth, all the most famous names in the history of the Kings Guard were there. The eulogies of legends she so idolised as a child. She knew them all by name alone, she did not have to pause and ponder the entries. But then, as she flicked to more recent times – one more. This page almost empty. A testament to regret and self reproach. Not a distant hero of the past but her own lover and predecessor. Lord Commander Jaime Lannister.

This book would be his legacy. How people would judge him in eras to come. And he had been so scathing in his own entry. The piteous little entered by Lord Commander Barristan Selmy accurately reflected the bias and judgment that the Kingslayer suffered from his peers. Followed closely by the left-handed scrawl noting absolutely nothing of remark or renown, displaying Jaime's lack of self-esteem.

He was wrong. He was worth more than all of the others combined. Because although he presented as a cocksure Golden Lion, to her he was eminent and real. Flawed but impeccable. Impulsive, driven by his heart and an achiever of greatness. His was an unsung song and many would endeavour to keep it that way.

But not Brienne. She was Lady Commander now and it was worth the risk of discovery. *Cleverly worded of course. This book was meant for her successors eyes only anyway. It made her pleased to think that their pages would run side by side. Their stories and histories so tightly entwined. They could nearly mirror each other. Perhaps many years from now when Kings and Kingsguard's themselves were forgotten, some perceptive scholar would read between the lines and deduce they were soulmates. That her appointment directly after his equated to so much more than what was being said.*

She kept herself steady. Feeling the burn in her nose and eyes but knowing her tears were cried out. So many had dried upon her cheeks, she was certain there could not be more left to shed. Even if the feelings remained. Time to liberate Jaime in the pages of history. To make him more than one-dimensional. To depict him as the incredible man he was. The Lady Commander dipped her quill and began writing:

*Captured in the field at the Whispering Wood:*
That was how it all began for them. *Set free by Lady Catelyn Stark in return for an oath to find and defend her two daughters:* The Oath he kept through her and their sword. *Lost his hand protecting the virtue of the Maid of Tarth.* Now her page and his would be forever interwoven. *Took Riverrun from the Tully rebels, without loss of life.* The truth. Not the lie Jaime had made them say in their goodbye at Winterfell. Now it was written here. Irrevokable. The word of Edmure Tully be damned. *Lured the Unsullied into attacking Casterly Rock, sacrificing his childhood home in service of a greater strategy.* He had always been a smart man. *Outwitted the Targaryen forces to seize Highgarden.*

*Fought at the Battle of the Goldroad bravely, narrowly escaping death by dragonfire.* All the things they'd talked about long into the cold winter nights. Catching up on lost time. Making it feel as though they were together even when they were apart. *Pledged himself to the forces of men and road north to join them at Winterfell, alone.*
Her brave, honourable lion.

_Faced the Army of the Dead and defended the castle against impossible odds until the defeat of the Night King._

She could still see them in her minds eye, fighting back to back. Side by side. Perfectly unified.

_I must not cry...._

Brienne had contemplated this last sentence for days. She could not tell the outright facts, a Stark King now sat the Throne. But nor would she lie here, Jaime deserved the truth to be known. Finally her White Knight's own words had come back to her, uttered months ago by a fireside in the woods.

_“They say guest, they mean prisoner.”_

She dipped her quill one last time:

_Escaped imprisonment and rode south in an attempt to save the capital from destruction._

And now her own certitude:

_Died protecting his Queen._

Not his lover. Not his partner.
His Queen. That which duty prevailed him to.

She lovingly stroked his page before slamming the book shut with finality.
It was written. It was lore.
Let any naysayers be condemned.

Chapter End Notes

_Congratulations folks!

Lets give ourselves a pat on the back because, as of this moment....

We are free of show canon! Yay!

Now I am solely in the drivers seat - full steam ahead!_
Jaime gasped. A long arduous intake of breath followed by a violent cough. It caused the dust to billow, choking him further. It was dark. Incredibly so.
An immense weight pressed down upon him. He could not move his limbs. Jaime was barely able to feel his arms, his legs - anything. Only the place where his head rested was soft. Cushioning him. His chest pushed against this surprising give, allowing him to breath. Jaime tried to lift his head, feeling a warm wet trickle run down the side of his cheek. Instinctually he wanted to wipe it – but he couldn't free his left hand. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light he began to discern shapes. His own right arm outstretched before him, pinned underneath rectangular.....bricks.
Bricks.
The Red Keep had collapsed on top of them.
“Cersei.” He wheezed, his eyes searching the distant darkness trying to make out her shape. It was only then he thought to look beneath him. He turned his head downwards, feeling the soft give of a human body. His cheek and chin brushing against the fabric of her bodice. As he moved he noticed his skull had a liquid quality. As though his brain was floating. . .
Then he saw her. “Cersei-” Another cough. He attempted to move his arms but he couldn't. Tried to wriggle free somehow but all he felt was pain and numbness. *Dammit to Seven Hells!* It was exceedingly heavy. The confines too dim to see clearly.
Pressing his ear back against her chest he tried to listen for her breathing. Even a faint heartbeat. Jaime held his own breath all the better to detect even the softest sound.
That was when he heard the voices.
“Aight now spread out. Let me know if ya find em.” They were loud. They were in the crypt. Jaime pressed his eyes shut. Willed his breath to steady. He could probably hold it once they drew near. He could not know if they were friend or foe. The latter was more likely. Footsteps approached, gradually growing louder. Jaime could sense a presence. Years of Knightly training attuning his awareness to unseen adversaries.
“Found em! Urghh and they're buried!” The speaker was standing right over him. Common folk by tongue.
“How didja think they died?” A second voice. “Start moving bricks.” This one was a ruffian. He had that harsh razor like quality. Other footfalls...*perhaps two more, maybe three?*
They were converging all around them. Through he sealed eyelids Jaime glimpsed the odd burst of light. *Fire, they must have torches.* Clinking of cement. The weight on top of his legs slowly decreasing. *Just keep still....* Jaime told himself.
Suddenly a tugging sensation, up near his gold hand. The scraping noise of someone moving quickly. “Whaddya think you're doing? We're in this together. Back to work!”
*Now I know what they want. But why bother to unbury us? Why not just take the hand and be on your way?*
“Hey boss! Where do you think this goes?” Voice three, coming from a distance. I did hear another set of footsteps. He addressed him as ‘boss’ which one is their leader? “Any of you touch the hand, you’ll find it shoved up your arse!” The Ruffian. He suspected as much.

Jaime was slammed from inside with sudden giddiness. Even with his eyes shut he felt it. The room swayed even though he laid motionless. His stomach churned with nausea. He willed himself through it.

“Aight listen up! We are gettin’ out of here, with those two bodies and the hand and we are going. That way!”

Bodies, they are taking us with them. That was a problem. From the muttering Jaime could here there was dissension in the ranks. Even so, one by one their footsteps receded.

When he was sure he was on his own, Jaime chanced to open his eyes. The blazes in the distance danced silhouettes on the chamber walls, as he tried to count the shadows. Five.

He assessed his own situation. The bricks had been moved. He was free.

Jaime flexed his legs. One screamed in pain. His right arm ached. His torso felt like it had endured a battering ram. My stab wounds.... A congealed assortment of blood and caked cement dust clotted what he could see. The blood continued to seep from his head.

Jaime knew he couldn't shift too much. Not yet.

If they came back suddenly that would notice his altered position. “Cersei.” He whispered with more urgency. “Can you hear me?”

If she was breathing, he would never be able to tell over the ruckus the looters were making.

He moved his left arm beneath him. Thankfully it had fallen under him in a way that had spared it from the injuries paining the rest of his body. He wriggled his fingers trying to regain feeling in the numb extremities.

In the muted light Jaime could see his sister, cold and motionless. A faint shade of blue painting her lips and complexion. Sorrow seeped beneath his leathers, creeping under his skin as he came to accept that the fate of his twin may not have been as fortunate as his own.

He watched the flames intently, the shadows still seeming busy in the distance. “Keep goin!” He heard the Ruffian demand.

“Cersei....” Painfully he lifted himself just enough to free his arm, slipping his hand behind his twin's head. What he felt turned his blood to ice. His hand sunk into a concaved indentation at the base of her skull. The cement chunk which she had fallen upon crashing its way through and ending her life. She was gone. Jaime stifled a sob. He couldn't cry, they would hear it. See it. Gently he lowered Cersei down, cringing as he placed her back upon the brick which caused the damage. He grappled with his own pain emotional and physical.

What do I do now?

Fight. You have more promises to keep.

Brienne's face came to his mind. Eyes shining like sapphires. His woman. His purpose.

A commotion.

Jaime heard the distinctive sounds of a scuffle. The slash of steel and gurgles of dying men.

He lay upon Cersei's chest, imitating how he had been before. Eyes closed.

Play dead.

After a few minutes (or was it only seconds that seemed to stretch forever) the chaos stopped. Then the only sound which remained was the approach of boots, crunching their way towards him.
through gravel and mortar. Stopping, looming above them.
“Right sisterfucker, lets get this off ya.”
The Ruffian crouched low, fiddling with the straps attaching his golden hand.
Jaime risked cracking open one eye to survey. The Ruffian was alone.
His leathers spattered with blood. He was intently focused on his task, clearly concerned about
damaging his prize. In his belt Jaime spotted the hilt of a dagger.

The Lion remembered being on a bridge, sparring with his wench. She had carried two swords.
He had feigned fatigue and whilst she leant over him, distracted, he had seized one from her
swordbelt. The manoeuvre could work again.
*I only get one shot at this.*

Jaime closed his eye again.
*Three, two...one.*

Using all his strength he flung his right arm upwards, contacting his assailant in the jugular, his
now loosened golden hand flying off in one direction. The impact caught the Ruffian off guard and
he teetered backwards on his heels. That was all the time Jaime needed. The element of surprise
gave him the upper hand. His left arm shot forward seizing the dagger from the belt and plunging it
straight into the looter's chest. Fighting through his own agony, he sickeningly twisted the hilt,
watching the aghast expression of horror as the thief took his final breath.

As the body fell forward, Jaime yanked out the blade, rolling to the side to avoid being pinned.
The quick burst of speed made his head rush, the entire crypt warping in and out. He gagged as the
contents of his stomach climbed up his throat. Forcing himself to swallow it back down.
Pulse pounding Jaime pushed himself to his feet, ensuring the dagger faced away from him in case
he collapsed on top of it. He waited, standing and swaying until the dizzy spell passed.
Feeling fresh blood slowly start to trickle from his stab wounds and head.
He knew he didn't have much time.

Assessing the outcome, he noted that the looter's corpse had fallen half on top of Cersei.
Much like Jaime had been only a short time prior.
A contemptible, revolting notion entered his head.
So repugnant he should be ashamed to even be entertaining it.
However... it seemed expedient. Practical and purpose serving.

He had oaths he wanted to keep.

Jaime felt a familiar sinking feeling take over his body. The same sensation he had whenever he
was about to do something despicable in the name of a greater good.
He stooped to collect his golden hand before staggering towards the torchlights, still burning
brightly by the exit. They had been securely lodged in the bundles of debris.
Stepping over corpses, he made sure not to leave a trace of his presence.
He dropped the dagger by the hand of one, stopping to dislodge a sword protruding from the dead
man's ribcage. Jaime slipped it through his belt and paid the thief back with a golden hand, placing
it upon his body. Then, wresting one of the torches from between two bricks, he fought off his
giddiness to return to Cersei and the Ruffian.

*Next gruesome task.*
The looter's right hand had landed conveniently upon a lump of cement. It took only one slash of
the sword to strike it clean from the wrist.

Jaime commanded himself to be strong, as he looked upon his twin for the last time. His other half
for so many years. They had come into the world together, but fate had decided that they wouldn't
leave it in the same manner. Risking his stab wounds to bend and kiss her on the forehead he
whispered. “Forgive me, sister. I tried to save you, but I must live. Go, be with our children.” Jaime
straightened, tears forming in his eyes. He held the torch aloft, choosing his mark. 
The velvet of Cersei's gown would be fastest to ignite. 
Dropping the torch on the fabric, he made himself say the words aloud. "Goodbye Cersei."

*With a sickening whoosh the dress caught aflame. Quick as a flash he collected the awful trophy that was the Ruffian's hand, knowing it couldn't be discovered here. Stepping back he watched as the bricks formed a natural cairn around the two bodies. Consuming both the former Queen and the looter in a wreath of fire.*

Jaime had to walk away as smoke began billowing from their cremation. 
He coughed, walking swiftly back to the exit. Removing the sword from his belt, he tossed it beside the man with the slit throat. 
*Whoever discovers them will presume they killed each other over my golden hand.*

Still clutching the oozing extremity, Jaime fled the smouldering crypt. 
Over the bricks, down the stairs, past the vacant stare of Euron Greyjoy. 
Out the way he had originally come in. 
His brain felt like it was rattling loose in his skull. The sight of the hand made his already sickened stomach churn like the tumultuous waters of Shipbreaker Bay.

Jaime practically fell onto the end of the dinghy, dropping in the hideous token and tugging the rope loose from the rocks. The last of his strength was used to propel it into the ocean. 
Tumbling in at the final second, the waves rocked the small vessel mercilessly as they jounced it out to sea. 
*Please take me to Tarth.* Jaime prayed, staring at the sky as the colours bled freakishly into each other. *I have to make it there for her.* 
Flipping onto his side he flung the hand overboard into the vast waters of the ocean. Clambering to grip the edge as he heaved. 
That was the last thing Jaime recalled as he slumped backwards into unconsciousness.

* * *

Jaime's eyes flew open. 
His brow was dotted with perspiration. He had been thrashing. 
The old man's voice was trying to soothe him. "Steady now, steady, whatever you're seeing it can hurt you no longer."

A scrap of fabric was pressed to his sweating head. 
This awakening was different, he remembered everything in absolute clarity. 
"Br.....n..." Jaime tried to find his voice becoming increasingly determined. "Bri.....ne..."

Melj tried to comprehend. "Yes, I know your brain must be hurting but we can't give you any more Milk of the Poppy."

The lion shook his head, ignoring the ache. That wasn't what he was trying to say. 
"Bri....Bri...." Deep breath. "Brienne." Jaime smiled. He had lived for her.

Chapter End Notes

So as previously mentioned, I research everything as I like to keep within the realms of realism. 
Therefore I provide the following supporting evidence that Jaime is in fact alive: 
Video of a pile of bricks which shockingly fell on two children – they both survived:
I also discovered that people with severe head injuries actually can appear/act normal for a sustained period of time, it depends upon the rate of internal bleeding. Symptoms will include nausea, headache and then unconsciousness.
Sitting up in the bed, Jaime woefully gazed down at his lean skeletal frame. He looked half starved.

“Liquid sustenance was all we could feed down your throat. You would have choked on or expelled any solids.” Melj appeared carrying a variety of instruments. Jaime noticed a razor, a looking glass, a brush and a file to name a few. I must look a fright.

“The good news is - during your unconscious state you weren’t expending energy so you required very little nourishment. It all balances.”

Jaime just nodded. His withdrawal symptoms had become troublesome to differentiate from his actual condition. Both causing headaches, nausea and a general state of feeling ratshit.

It was good to be awake though.

“How long have I been out?”

“Hard to say. You haven’t been asleep the entire time.”

“I haven’t?”

“No. In order to keep you alive we had to wake you several times. It is only the most recent few - once the swelling had gone down - that you are able to remember. Probably for the best. You weren’t in a good way.”

Jaime decided he didn’t want to ask the grizzly details. Unnerving thoughts about chamber pots and sponge baths. It somewhat made his dignity fly right out the window.

However, there were particular things he did want to know. “What did you have to do to me? To fix my head?”

“A risky procedure. One I personally have never performed before, but necessary. From where I stood you were dead either way.”

The old man parted Jaime’s hair and held up the looking glass.

A very sinister looking scar lined a patch of his scalp along with what looked like puncture holes which had now healed over.

Jaime shivered. It was disturbing.

“We had to release the pressure inside your skull.” He lowered the mirror which Jaime took from his hands. “All things considered, it went very well. We didn’t just have your head injury to contend with. There were the stab wounds which needed suturing and then we had to watch you for infection due to the fragments of rubble. You had only the smallest chance of surviving. Like I have said.....you were spared for a reason.”

It certainly didn't look like he'd been spared. Jaime grimaced at his own reflection. Hair overgrown,
a ludicrously long beard and a sallow sunken face. He needed proper food, post-haste.
“I can't guarantee the headaches will ever go away.”
Jaime shrugged. “That's the least of my problems isn't it?”
Melj was busy preparing a basin of water for him. The lion didn't want to be pushy but he really did need an answer to his earlier question. “Could you estimate how long?”
“Nigh on six turns of the moon.”
Jaime blanched. “What!”
“I may have miscalculated.”
Panic settled over him like an anxious shroud. *Brienne...she has been on her own for that long.*
“Melj – where are we?”
Jaime pictured the geography in his mind. Not too far.... “How did I get here?”
“Youself along with a couple of Ironborn were rescued out of Blackwater Bay by a fishing vessel. I saved the Captain from an accident of his own several years ago. He was keen to return the favour. He took to the sea when he saw the disaster unfolding in Kings Landing and brought what survivors he could to us.” Melj saddened. “The other two were not as fortunate as you. They clearly had served their purpose in this world.”
He set the water basin next to Jaime, an unusual mischievous quality to his usually serious countenance. “I will enquire only one thing and by all means you do not have to humour an old man for it is merely curiosity – but in a word, how would you summarise your unfinished business in life? What is spurring you on?”
Jaime did not hesitate. “Love.”
The elderly fellow smiled. “The most noble of causes – no wonder you were spared.”

* * *

“Melj -” Jaime sat on an upturned steel bucket, an errant breeze coming off the ocean toussling his hair into his eyes. “You have not yet asked me my name.” He had kept his hair longer to cover the scars on his head, though he had trimmed his beard right back. With the warmer weather he didn't need its protection as much.
He sported another new scar on his right cheek (which he couldn't hide) and several under his clothes where Euron's blade had bitten.
Jaime hoped it made him look rugged.

Manual labour was the distraction of the day as he used a very worn out brush to scrub his boots. The layers of cement, dust and blood long set upon the leather. Ordinarily in frivolous Lannister fashion he would have cast them aside and bought a new pair. But now they were one of the few possessions he had to his name and therefore must be salvaged. Even so....he hadn't had to scrub boots for years.
*What I wouldn't give for a pesky squire right now.*
“Who you were is of little concern to me. I care only who you are and what you'll become.” Melj scrounged around in the vegetable garden, collecting what he could for tonight's soup.

*Soup.* Something Jaime had ingested enough of to last him five lifetimes.

Jaime withdrew his stumped arm from inside the boot and defeatedly dropped the befouled footwear next to him. “About that....”
“Yes?”
“How can I begin again when I don't have a copper to my name and no idea where to start. I am a one handed middle aged man who suffers from chronic headaches and has no skills he can possibly put to use.” He sighed. “I will never be able to repay you either.”
“Have I asked for recompense? Because I want for none. My payment will be knowing you
achieved whatever it is the Stranger spared you to do.”
“Well, it doesn't sit comfortably with me.”
“Why?”
Jaime shrugged. “My family has a thing about always paying their debts.”
Melj stood and gave Jaime a skeptical stare. “You need to watch comments like that my friend. I may have no interest in who you were but others will not be so willing to turn a blind eye.”
Jaime lifted his head inquisitively. “Does that mean you know?”
“That means if you truly wish to begin again, it must be a clean slate. New name. Honest living. Working towards your goal. Do you have it in mind?”
“Yes.” It was all he thought about. Sapphire waters and sapphire eyes. Being back with her again.
“So, what is the first step towards accomplishing it?”
Jaime paused to think practically. “Coin.” Something he had never had to think about in all of his life. Now it was pivotal to success.
“Well then, you'll need a paying job. The Portside town is not too far down that hillside. Plenty of honest days work to be had there.”
Jaime wrinkled his nose. “What doing?”
The old man just stared at him, unimpressed by his snobbery.
“Alright! I will go ask around tomorrow.” He picked up his boots to head back into the stable.
Melj called out after him. “Every day you procrastinate is a day longer until you see her.”
Jaime stopped in his tracks, utterly bemused.
_Infernal old man. How did he know what I was thinking?_ He could be spooky like that.
Ordinary

Chapter Summary

Follow on from last night's chapter as Jaime tries to find his footing in his new capacity of 'smallfolk'.
Seven help him lol.

Chapter Notes

This one was fun to write. :)
Still loving every minute!

The village marketplace bustled with vendors, the wall of sound an assault on his ears after the serenity at the Infirmary.
This won't do, I'm becoming reclusive. Jaime tugged irritably on his ill-fitting clothes. They had been donated. He was wearing second hand rags. Oh how Father would loathe that.

Past me. Jaime reminded himself. Previous life.
New me, new life.
Poor, crippled, plagued with headaches and looking for a job.

The humour of the situation wasn't lost on him but his aim was worth the humiliation. He needed coin to buy passage to Tarth. Jaime wouldn't ask Melj or anyone else from the hospice. They didn't have that kind of money and had done more than enough for him already. Besides, what scant funds and donations they did receive needed to go towards replenishing their medicines. He had taken nearly all of their stores of Milk of the Poppy and it didn't come cheaply for those outside the fellowship of the Citadel.

As he stood amongst the stalls, thriving with colour and life, Jaime experienced a concept entirely foreign to him....insignificance.
People bumped into him as they went about their business, without so much as a second glance. He blended flawlessly into the throng of people without the standard chorus of My Lord or Ser's.
It was truly humbling.
He was normal, mundane and – entirely incompetent.
A life as the eldest son of the wealthiest family in Westeros really doesn't set you up with many skills....

Upon waking this morning with his mission in mind, Jaime's first instinct was of course to live by his sword. If I still had one....
To earn coin by entering fights or tournaments as a mystery knight.
Melj had quickly quashed that idea. “One more blow to the head and your second chance at life is over.”
Thereby went his swiftest and most viable source of income.
He shrugged it off, he was being overly confident anyway. He was a left handed fighter now.
Jaime wandered the busy streets looking for inspiration.
Fishing...no, he didn't have patience and they smelt rank.
Unpacking carts – kind of difficult with one hand. Anyone would be mad to hire him for that.
Everything would take twice as long.
Butcher? - Pass.
Bookeeper. Numbers have never been my strong suit.
Smith... not with one hand again.
Seven Hells! I am positively useless!
Doesn't anyone here need a battle strategist? Or an overindulged jackanapes to deliver them sarcastic comments and trot around on his white destrier?
Talk about a reality check on life.
Maybe I could work in a pleasure house..... He chuckled at the ridiculousness of that thought.
Perhaps once women would have paid for him but not with how he was looking at the moment.
This Gold Lion had seen better days. As amusing as the expression on his Wenches' face would have been when he told her how he obtained his funds.
It was all silly thoughts, trying to temper the ache of Brienne's absence. Over the course of his existence he had only ever been with two women. As a man, when Jaime devoted his heart he was entirely faithful, body and soul. Not even for the entire Iron Bank of Braavos would he consider betraying his Lady Knight.

Gods, I miss her.
A deep unforgiving melancholy overwhelmed him.
She was his counter-part. His attracting opposite. His voice of common sense.
The deprivation of her down to earth calming presence and infallible practicality just another void Jaime desperately needed occupied.
One that could only be filled by a towering, insufferably stubborn but equally endearing blue eyed woman.

A stall caught his attention from the peripherals of his vision.
It was a small stand belonging to a gem merchant. Jaime walked over to ponder the jewellery, he was no stranger to finery, the Lannister mines having produced an abundance of gold for years.
He had only a basic eye for stones but this one trinket in particular made him smile.
“It's beautiful isn't it?” The owner of the stall startled him from his own thoughts.
“Yes, very. Sapphire right?”
The jeweller handed him the ring for closer inspection.
“Star sapphire. Exceedingly rare. The origins of this one I suspect from the far reaches of Essos.”
“Makes sense, I hadn't seen one cut like that before.”
The man nodded. “I acquired it some years ago as part of a trade. Unfortunately for me, not many seem to perceive its beauty. The Westerosi ladies prefer the faceted gems that sparkle and shine. This illuminates from within.”
“That's why I like it.” The stone reminded him of her eyes. An underappreciated beauty. All those other girls were obvious and showy. This treasure was meant for only a lucky few to behold, someone who knew how to look beyond first appearances and see the loveliness inside.
The jeweller looked at him expectantly. “Not for me I'm afraid. Maybe once, but these days I'm running a little low on coin.”
“It’s a shame. Regardless it is nice to meet someone else who can admire its art.” Jaime reluctantly passed the ring back to the vendor.
Wishing once again for one of his many purses of Gold Dragons.

A commotion across the square pulled him out of his reverie. A small crowd had gathered to witness a loud altercation between supplier and merchant. Jaime joined them to watch the spectacle.
“I will not accept these inferior imitations!”
“The deal was struck! I am here to make the delivery as arranged.”
“Arranged by a halfwit who will no longer be making any dealings on my part.”
“I can assure you my wines are of the highest quality! I promised you ten barrels of the finest
Dornish Red, twelve barrels of Hippocras from Highgarden and a half dozen casks of Arbour Gold
and indeed I have delivered! Now honour your pledge and make payment.”
“What you have here in front of me is the furthest thing from the fine wines which you claim. I
have a reputation! I sell to the gentry! I cannot, will not, pay you good coin for cheap
reproductions!”
“How dare you claim my wares are false! This is an insult! I challenge you to prove it otherwise. I
have travelled all this way, hauling heavy casks to fulfill your order and now you cheat me?”
“It is you who is the cheat! And I will prove it. Open your barrels. We shall put it to the test....”
“Are you absurd? Compromise my precious cargo so you can lie just to make your point? Why I
wouldn't trust your testimony as far as I could spit.”
“You are afraid.”
“Fine. Here -" The supplier whirled to face the crowd of spectators. “We have an assortment of
impartial tongues. You produce samples of your 'fine wines' and we shall pit them against my
superior products. I gladly wager they will taste no difference.” An excited murmur passed through
the crowd. They liked this idea. Jaime sniggered. This is such a farce.
“They are lowborn! Half of them have never tasted such as my wines! They have no palate!”
“Now it is you who is afraid! Meet my challenge or pay up.” The supplier stood with his arms
crossed.
The merchant huffed. “Come, we will mark the barrels accordingly. They will sample them at
random, that ought to stop them catering to you for giving them a free drink.”

The smallfolk began jostling for position, keen to take part in this free tasting session.
Jaime stood to the side near the front of the crowd. So this is what life is like in a marketplace?
Suitably entertaining.
A table was procured with the barrels arranged behind and cups produced. Quite the
production....but then this transaction would be worth a substantial amount if it goes ahead.
Employees of both parties kept the crowd at bay.
“Best of three.” The merchant declared.
The supplier nodded in agreement, “Why I am even so confidant I will allow you to pick two of the
three participants.” This fraudster really knew how to pander to the crowd.
The merchant selected an older looking woman who was all to pleased to come up and have a try.
Jaime presumed he was angling for experience, hoping she may have had a chance to sample the
finer things in life.
“Well?” The merchant asked.
“It is hard to say. They all seem quite the same to me. I had a fever some twenty years ago. Lost
most my sense o'taste.”
Jaime laughed loudly. He couldn't help it. The look on the merchants face was priceless.
He quickly suppressed his amusement, it was drawing unwanted attention.

“Her opinion cannot count!”
“Very well but you only get two more chances before you must pay up. And the next choice is
mine.” The supplier chose a very eager man from the motley assembly. From the way he walked,
he was obviously already thoroughly soused.
“Dey all.....” Hiccup. “Taste mighty sweet to meeeeee! Very fines if I do shay so meshelf.”
“He is drunk!” The merchant was outraged. “You swindler! You have shown your true colours,
you chose him on purpose!”
“It saddens me that you cannot lose with grace. But have it your way. Clean slate. One more try.”
The merchant scanned the crowd, his eyes surprisingly coming to rest on Jaime.
“You.” Jaime lifted his brows in surprise. “You seem to think this is all amusing.”

*Why not?* The Lannister family had a long proud history of being sots, he may as well use it for the good of someone else.

Ensuring he snagged a clean cup, Jaime tried the small assortment of wines.

“Do you have a verdict?” The supplier asked cockily.

“Well....the first is actually a Dornish Red.” *Happy memories.* “The second might have once been red wine but it is so watered down it couldn't set an infant drunk. The third is Arbour Gold, the next Hippocras. After that is—” Jaime paused for effect. He did love having an audience. “I'm almost certain its horse urine - don't ask me how I know - and the last one? I wouldn't even waste my time boiling it to rinse out a wound.”

The supplier had turned visibly pale.

Jaime took that as his cue to leave.

From behind he could hear the sounds of instructions being barked at the men, they were being told to reload the barrels onto the wagon. At least he had been able to help.

“You there! Stop.” Jaime whirled ready for a fight. He expected the angry supplier or perhaps he had been recognised by one of the smallfolks.

But instead it was the merchant. “That was an impressive display. You know wines?”

Jaime nodded. “My family has had a bit of experience with them.”

*Drinking mainly.* He decided not to add that part.

His answer seemed to please the merchant. “I ask as I need a new assistant....if you're interested.”
Chapter Summary

We check in with our heroine... Brienne recollects one of her night's spent with Jaime in Winterfell. (actually the night he returns from drinking with Tyrion)

Chapter Notes

I thought we deserved a fluffy, slightly raunchy reward for passing the thirty chapter mark. :)

When she closed her eyes she could still be with him. Relishing his nearness in the warmth of her chambers. Four weeks worth of memories to sustain her for a lifetime....

She remembered their early days, still a little awkward and unsure. Jaime had somehow slipped seamlessly into cohabitation but it had taken Brienne by surprise. A pleasant feeling but she wasn't sure how to act. She had been a loner for so long. Taking on Pod as her Squire had been a massive adjustment. But this was another level entirely. Jaime was everywhere; his boots on her floor, jerkin flung over her bedpost, nestled beneath her sleeping furs. He was used to a shared life. He had been in close confines with a woman since he was still in the womb.

Jaime needed company. His incessant chatter in the Riverlands had driven her to the point of insanity. They were fundamental opposites but it made their magnetism stronger. She hadn't been aware it was happening. Their bond evolving into a tangibility that even those around them could sense.

This time...she was fully attune to the situation. It was difficult to miss. On this particular night he had come hammering on her door whilst she was heating water for her wash basin over the fire. Another task she preferred to do herself, in her own time. She shunned the concept of attendants and help, fairer ladies who would gawk at her and make her feel over privileged. But she was born a noblewoman and cleanliness was important to her even in the icy conditions of the North.

Brienne had started at the sudden knocking, knowing full well it was a prelude to intrusion. Unsolicited visits in the witching hours seemed to be a habit of his. What is he doing here? He had gone off with his brother and she hadn't expected his return.

She looked down at herself, her loose fitting cotton shift was flimsy, worn so she could wash without exposure to the cold. At least she still wore her breeches. Brienne self-consciously folded her arms across her chest. An absolutely pointless exercise but it made her feel better. She scolded herself as she crossed to the door. It was Jaime – he had seen much more of her body on more than one occasion. “Come on wench!” Does he have to announce it to the entire castle?
She roughly jerked open the door, hiding behind it in case onlookers had gathered in the hallway. Jaime came unceremoniously barging in as per usual.

“What were you doing?” His eyes were alight with mischief as he glanced around the room conspiratorially.

She shut and locked the door after him. “Warming water on the fire…”

“That's boring. Don't you know that's what help is for?”

“What are you doing here?” Her annoyance was reflected by her tone.

“Do I need a reason?” He sauntered over to her catlike and fiendish, his face inches from hers. She could smell the alcohol permeating from him.

“You're drunk.”

“No I'm not.”

“You smell like a Dornish winemakers.”

“It was Arbour Gold actually.”

She turned away before he could lean in, supremely unimpressed.

“Am I unwelcome?”

She removed the pot from the fire and filled her wash basin in the corner. “You interrupted my plans.”

“Very sorry. They sounded positively enthralling.” Sarcasm dripped from his tone as he perched himself on the end of her bed and began undressing. “Don't let me disturb you. Go about your business. Pretend I'm not here.”

Brienne huffed. That was impossible. He made far too much noise.

She walked to the basin, resolved not to let him win. Picking up her washcloth she tried to go about business as usual, running the scrap of fabric down her arms and under her shift. But he was watching her. She could feel his eyes boring into her back. She wet the washer again and....

Hot breath and warm lips caressed the back of her neck.

Catching the droplets in their tracks. She stilled. A husky voice whispered in her ear.

“I was wrong. I'll admit it. Turns out these plans were enticing afterall.”

Brienne exhaled. She didn't realise she had been holding her breath.

“Ser Jaime....” There was a warning in her tone.

He ignored it, spinning her around to face him. Amusement lit up his features as he looked her up and down. “Gods - you are tall.” He chuckled.

Brienne stomped away. “I don't need you to come here mocking me.”

Like a flash he was on her heels. “Wench, I meant it as a compliment!”

She whirled on him. “You expect me to believe that?!?”

He grabbed her arm. “Hey....”

“A foot taller than all the other boys? Big Brienne?” She cited his own words back at him. A rare moment of letting the hurt show.

His expression changed as he realised they weren't playing. He trailed his hand down her arm and clasped her hand.

“Come on....” Jaime's voice was soft. He tried to pull her towards the edge of the bed as he sat back down and studied her face.

Looking through to her soul.

She took two steps forward. Towering over him.

If she had to be a freak, she would use it to her advantage.

“What have I done?” He asked in complete sincerity.

She looked away then back at him. The truth hard to admit.
“Why do you only come to me when inebriated?” There it was. The crux of her angst. He had to be drunk to be with her. To want her. Jaime let out a sigh, suddenly understanding. “I'm not drunk Brienne.” She actually believed him. All silliness had leech out of him. Now he was sensible. Earnest and deep. Her Jaime. The one that hid. “Trust me, I well and truly sobered up towards the end of the evening.” He was troubled. The roguish behaviour a distraction. It was her turn to see through him. “What happened?”

He guided her towards him, encouraging her into his lap. She didn't know how she was supposed to sit. She was far too large to fold into his arms. She softly lowered herself into him, like sitting astride a horse. “A visitor from the South.”

“An envoy?”

“Bronn.”

“Ah.” She nodded. The presence of the sellsword could never mean anything good. Jaime ran his hand up and down the length of her thigh. Calming himself with the contact. She wanted to touch him back. She just never knew how.

“You know I nearly died tonight.” Slightly more jovial. “A crossbow bolt almost hit me. It came this close to my head.”

She didn't need to ask anymore questions. Acting on instinct she ran her hand through his hair, on the side he’d indicated.

“Of course – then you would have had a quieter night.” Back to teasing. He wanted to forget.

She rolled her eyes. He moved in to kiss her and this time she welcomed it. His mouth tasted like wine and their was an urgency in his movements. When he pulled away his trademark smirk had returned.

“You know...I could envy your horse. I quite fancy you like this.” A wink. “I'd like to be ridden.”

“My water's going cold.” He laughed openly as she dismounted.

Brienne returned to her basin as he finished preparing for bed. She had to learn not to be so sensitive. To trust in Jaime's affections and see them for the true feelings that they were.

To let him in – in every aspect.

Her room, her emotions, her body.... Seizing upon courage she unlaced her breeches, pulling them off with her small clothes. Thankful for the extra length of her shift. Another perk to being tall, she thought wryly. Most shirts were too short for her.

Jaime wasn't watching anyway. He had put himself to bed and was feigning sleep. She could tell as his breathing was still too erratic for genuine slumber.

He looked very comfortable....on her side.

She frowned and strode over to him. “Get up.”

“Can't you see I'm sleeping?” He raised an eyebrow but didn't open his eyes.

“Yes, I can see you're pretending to sleep. On MY side of the bed.”

“I don't think we've actually determined whose side is whose...”

“Would you disrupt my sleeping patterns when I have a job to do? Move!”

“It just sort of happened that I ended up on the other side. But I think I like here better. It smells like wench.”

“My chambers, I call the shots. Move!” She flung back the sleeping furs.

Jaime chuckled and cracked one eye open. “Just for tonight, maybe we'll alternate...”

“You promised to serve under my command and I'm commanding you now, MOVE!”

Both his eyes flew open, they sparked with enjoyment. “We're not on the battlefield now Ser Brienne, though sometimes...” He trailed off as he caught sight of a flash of skin. Noticing the exposed flesh of her thigh. He sat up and reached under the hem of her shift, his
fingers making contact with her buttocks.
He grinned in pure delight.
Brienne held him back with a firm hand flat on his chest. “If you don't return to your allocated side of the bed right now, I can assure you this evening is not going to end the way you want it to.”

Jaime held her eye contact defiantly as he got up and moved around the foot of the bed.
She hovered over him every inch of the way so he couldn't backtrack.
With an air of smugness, he planted himself firmly in the centre, sitting halfway between both their sides.
She narrowed her eyes at him. Her breathing becoming laboured. *This is fun.*
Brienne leaned in as though to kiss him but stopped short. Instead she tapped him firmly on the side of the leg, steering him over just like you would a horse. He shifted an inch.
She glared at him. He moved another inch.
Excruciatingly slowly edging his way onto his side of the bed. She assessed the distance studiously.
Gesturing him to move further. No words needed to be spoken.
Jaime held his chin high, basking in this newfound foreplay as he surrendered his ground and moved the final inch, officially occupying his side alone.

They lunged for each other. A passionate mess of arms and lips.
Hunggrily claiming their mate, as if starved for a lifetime. Brienne straddled him assuredly, she had been riding a horse all her life. Finally a skill she could call upon to compensate for her inexperience. Jaime tore her shift at the shoulder in his eagerness to cover her in fevered kisses, his beard raking her soft flesh.
Her long fingers made swift work of his laces, two hands more adroit than one.
As a couple they needn't conform to standards and had always found their own rhythm.
She was a Knight, not a conventional Lady. And Jaime embraced her for it.

* * *

Jaime guided her head to the pillow. Snuggling her softly in the sleeping furs.
Her eyelids heavy, her eyes drifting closed. He removed the torn remnants of her shift. Coaxing it over her head as she lifted her arms. Retucking her long limbs beneath the covers. “You'll be warmer this way.” He murmured to her.
“I don't see how.” She could feel Jaime moving and peered through her sleepy vision to see him stripping off the last of his clothes.
“Like this.” He slipped under the furs, wrapping both his arms around her and pressing close.
If this was cohabitating, it was definitely something she could get used to.
Falling asleep in her lovers arms...
On their respective sides.

* * *

Brienne's eyes opened to the present.
Silent. Dim.
Moonlight filtered through high windows casting a haze which allowed her eyes to adjust.
A solitary world in a bleak empty chamber.
Her chest ached with longing.
She wished Jaime was there to annoy her again. . .
Jaime found time passed quite quickly when he was working. Days turned into weeks. Headaches slowly receded (both abetted and hindered by the alcohol his job required him to consume) and the funds, very gradually added up. Jaime had nearly choked to death on his own air when he discovered how little he'd be getting paid. Considering the merchant was ‘allegedly’ quite generous.

Jaime consolidated his coin, only spending when he felt it fair to buy supplies for the Infirmary. Melj had of course let him stay, ever eager to aid him in accomplishing his greater goal. Jaime suspected the old man might be quite the romantic at heart. He had accused him of it one evening over dinner, soup again with bread. Yes, he had splurged and bought bread. What luxury.

“Melj, would you have been as supportive if I’d said my purpose was revenge?” The former lion had smirked. Titters of amusement floated around the table between the other staff and the handful of recovering patients. They all knew the elderly fellow had a tendency to avoid directive questions. “It is not my place to judge.” Jaime just shook his head. He would get an answer out of him one of these days.

It was the nights that tended to drag. All alone in a small, uncomfortable bed (there was a benefit to Milk of the Poppy, you couldn’t feel where you passed out) staring at a decrepit wooden ceiling wondering where your better half was. Fretting over how long you’d been apart. Is she lonely? Does she miss me? Has she made herself forget?

“Duncan!” Ah yes, that's my name now. Jaime often had to remind himself to answer to it. He had chosen it as a private joke. One of the great knights, a former Lord Commander of the Kingsguard and by the word of the legends, incredibly tall like his wench.

“What's wrong Alf?”

“Three flagons of Honeywine were broken comin’ off the wain.”
“Who dropped them?”
“One of their boys.”
“Then they are going to have to replace them.”
“You wanna come tell ‘em that?”
Jaime sighed and grabbed the keys to lock the storage cellar. He had been ticking off inventory as the most recent delivery arrived. His job was easy enough. The merchant often traveled, selling his wines to the nearby Houses so Jaime's job was to act as his proxy. Receiving the deliveries, arguing with swindlers, tasting the quality of goods – the usual. Jaime liked it when he could work with autonomy, though that part was hastily coming to an end, the merchant was due to arrive back this evening.

After he had finished sealing the doors Jaime rounded the side of the building to inspect the damage.
The 'boy' was only about three and ten. Gangly, awkward and looking like he feared for his life. The broken pottery and dampened gravel telling its own story.

“Please, I can't pay for that! If ya tell 'em I'm gonna get the boot. Me Ma's got four more little'uns at home and I gotta be the man since me father never came back from the Wars.”
Jaime sighed. “Alf! I'm going down to the docks!” He leaned in towards the boy using a conspiratorial staged whisper. “Run along. You never touched them alright?”
The boy nodded eagerly and scampered off to Gods know where. Most likely he was a local lad keen to pick up a few coppers by completing some delivery runs.

Jaime began the walk down to the ocean, enjoying the refreshing salt breezes which came off the water in the afternoon. Casterly Rock had been by the seaside, just on the opposite side of the continent. He could get used to breathing this air again, in Kings Landing the over population and slums well and truly polluted any gusts that came from the Bay. Tarth will be even lovelier than this, away from it all.
Jaime remembered when he'd first glimpsed the island from afar. It still gave him a strange tingling sensation. Precognition of sorts.

Approaching the boat Jaime was glad it was this particular trader. Some he had forged a solid rapport with whilst others – well their looks could sour milk.
Jaime hollered out to the cabin crew. “I have come to see your Captain!”
He waited patiently on the dock for him to emerge.

“Duncan! Why did you walk all this way?”
“Gisson, we have to talk and you're not going to like it.”

The Captain bounded off the boat and slapped him on the back. He had been trying to trade with Jaime's boss for years but it was 'Duncan' who had finally made some mutually lucrative deals occur. “What happened?”

“Three flagons of Honeywine smashed. Don't ask me how, maybe the wain hit a pot hole. All I know is when we went to unload them, they were nothing but puddles leaking through the timber.”
Jaime shrugged.

“Its not like I loaded them that way!”
“I know, I know.” Holding up his hands in mock surrender, Jaime called on the old inherent skills of Lann the Clever. “But you have to replace them Gisson. Three measly flagons of Honeywine surely aren't enough to sever this deal over. Now if it were up to me, I may overlook it. But you know what the boss is like.”
Gisson huffed. “Trouble is – I'm all out of Honeywine.”
Jaime folded his arms across his chest. “What else you got?”

“Blackberry Wine or Smokeberry Brown.”
“We'll take the Blackberry, its sweet enough so we should be able to sell it to the same palate as the Honeywine.”
“Fine.” He called out to his crew to fetch three flagons of Blackberry wine from the hull before turning back to him. “Tell me why you are wasting your glib skills in this going nowhere old Port-town?”
“A man has to earn a living.”
“Shame...I could use a shrewd negotiator. Clearly I’m a pushover.” Jaime chuckled, he was right. “Don’t have the funds to pay an extra set of hands though. Just have to offload the last of my stock in the Stormlands then back to Essos for a buying trip. Resources are tight.”

Jaime's eyes widened. “Did you say the Stormlands?”
“Yes, what of it?”
“You don't by any chance plan to stop at Tarth?”
Gisson eyed him quizzically. “I may if I need supplies. My next stop is Parchments and then to Storm's End. After that I planned Essos but Tarth isn't out of the way. Why?”
“I will come. I will work, helping you sell your remaining stock without requiring payment – if it will buy me passage to Evenfall Hall.”
“What do you want there? Lord Selwyn's quite the no-nonsense sought from what I hear. Not exactly the kind of place to set up a Winesink.”
“That's my business Gisson. The real question is what's your answer?”
The Captain smiled. “Sure. You've got yourself a deal.”
He went to shake on it but offered the wrong hand causing Jaime to brandish his stump defeatedly. With an awkward chuckle, Gisson swapped arms. “We leave tomorrow.”

* * *

It was bittersweet saying goodbye to Melj. Jaime had definitely underestimated how difficult it would be. He had a strained relationship at best with his own father and the kindly old man had stepped in to fill that role.
Jaime clasped the elderly fellow by the shoulder. “When I have funds. When I am settled. I will send you supplies. All I can.”
Melj just smiled. “You don't have to do any such thing.”
Oh stuff it. Jaime pulled him in for a hug.
“Thank you.” He told him with sincerity. “For everything.”
“You are welcome my friend.” Then he pulled away and added. “Go find your woman.”

* * *

The merchant raged when Duncan quit. Calling him every ingrate under the sun. Jaime didn't care. His future was beckoning.
He was light-hearted as he walked through the marketplace one last time. Then he stopped suddenly. He still felt there was one thing left to do.

Counting out a good portion of the coins he had saved he approached the Jeweller's stall.
“You're back.” The man was pleased.
“I still cannot buy it outright. I would ask if you would accept a down payment and keep the ring aside for me. I will send someone to collect it when I have the funds.”
“I cannot keep it indefinitely, what if you do not return?”
“You told me that you have had that piece for ages with little to no interest. I would think something better than nothing.”
The jeweller pondered this. “I will give you a year. After that the funds are forfeit.”
“Deal.” Jaime knew it was a long shot but he earnestly wanted it for her. Something about the blue of the sapphire coupled with its yellow gold casing reminded him of them. A golden lion with a rare underappreciated gem.
“What name do I keep it under?” He quickly scrawled a rough contract on parchment.
Jaime could only smirk at his chosen moniker. “Duncan Bluestone.”
 Chapter Summary

When Jaime met Selwyn

Chapter Notes

That's right! I promised two chapters today didn't I? ;)
I always keep my promises.

The wooden dock creaked beneath his well traveled boots. A sound most welcome to his ears. The life that teemed around him, a living bustling vision of her world. Jaime had imagined his arrival at Tarth so many times, now it was finally happening it felt like walking into a dream.

“You sure you wanna stay here?” Gisson questioned him for the thousandth time. “Coz we can keep going to Essos.”
Jaime offered his left hand for the Captain to shake. “Thanks for everything but this is my port. Be sure to send your regards next time you sail past.”

“Confident aren’t you? Absolute madness if you ask me.” He had told Gisson very little of his intentions, despite the seafarers best efforts. Somehow the absence of detail seemed to make him more certain Jaime was walking into folly.

“No other way to be Giss. Now one last favour, you’ve been here before – do you have any idea where I might find someone official?”
The Captain looked reluctant but was still a pushover. “At the end of the dock you’ll find one of Lord Selwyn’s men. They take inventory of the incoming ships, making sure the appropriate taxes are paid and the like. He reports back to the Evenstar himself. That should do.”

“Tomorrow you’ll wish you listened to me!”

He could only laugh as he walked away, navigating between people going about their work. Honestly, he was glad to be back on land. Former lions weren’t equipped for a life at sea. It didn’t take Jaime long to locate the man. The official was accompanied by two armoured guards and carrying the blue and red heraldry of House Tarth. The crescent moons and sunbursts instantly recognisable.

Here we go. Joining the queue, Jaime tried to frame his approach.
But he had always been a man of the opinion that direct was best.
“Name:”
“Duncan Bluestone.”
“Purpose of business:”
“I request an audience with Lord Selwyn.” The man appeared completely unmoved. “It’s regarding his daughter.”
“Two merchant ships seeking supplies before embarking to Essos. One Dornish fishing trawler claiming they were blown off course by a tempest and require leave to stay and complete repairs....”

“Hmmm. Must have been quite the tempest.” The Evenstar heard the daily list of activity at the Port of Evenfall Hall. He received it with his general level of interest.

“.....And one – apologies my Lord for even bringing this to your attention but it is my duty to report all arrivals on our shores – insolent traveler who requests an audience with your Lordship.” That was unusual. Lord Selwyn furrowed his brow. “Not to encourage such impertinence but did he mention what regarding?”

His clerk took a deep breath. “Yes, My Lord, he absurdly claimed it was in regards to your daughter.”

The Evenstar's first instinct was to take offence. “What gall has taken this knave? How dare-”

Then something Brienne had said during her peculiar visit re-entered his mind. “Bring him to me. I will sought out this effrontery personally.”

I can't believe it actually worked.
Jaime had been making inquiries at a nearby inn when they found him. Household guards swarming in to issue his summons. It quite tickled Jaime's fancy. Ruffling the Father's feathers is nearly going to be easier than it is to ruffle his daughter's. Though nowhere near as fun.

The Tarth's were nothing if not insistent that all rules and decorum by obeyed. Exactly a Lannister's favourite things to toy with.

Without ceremony he had been escorted up to Evenfall Hall. Only for one second did Jaime chance to think that this might be too easy. But then again, I am deserving of a sudden change in the trend of my unfortunate luck....

The guards pushed apart the double doors opening up to the great-hall. The room was airy. Bathed in blue with the odd splash of red like their banners. It had the ancient bearings of a castle but also with a welcoming calm. Jaime could see himself being quite at home here. He wished he'd been given the opportunity to change though. Make himself a little more presentable.

The guards stopped in place halfway across the room and prodded him forward to continue on his own.

Jaime approached with curiosity. The niggling feeling that this man could one day be his good-father churning up unwanted nerves. Upon the high seat an older Lord stared at him disdainfully. With his chin held high the man regarded him with an austere superiority Jaime had only encountered once in his life before – Brienne.

But the lion was not the kind to be intimidated. Stopping below the dais he boldly regarded Lord Selwyn straight back and waited to be addressed.

“What is your name?” Lord Selwyn's tone was clipped and to the point. “Duncan Bluestone.” Jaime responded. They were surrounded by numerous guards and staffers, this was not the time or place for revelations.

“And by what authority, do you claim to have the right, to speak with me regarding my Daughter?” In this situation a wise man would tread carefully – I have never been that man.

“Why, hers of course.” The Evenstar looked taken aback, now was Jaime's chance to articulate.
“Brienne wished for me to speak with you.” He glanced around. “Privately, if we could.”
“Lady Brienne Tarth,” Lord Selwyn put emphasis on her title, he seemed peevish. “Does not associate with common traders and most certainly has never mentioned anyone by the name of Duncan Bluestone.”
“In all due respect Lord Selwyn, Ser Brienne,” Jaime used the same emphasis for the correction as his Father had, “Has encountered numerous people in her travels and has not returned to Tarth for many a year. So perhaps she is familiar with a Duncan Bluestone – me.”
“Your impudence knows no bounds.”
“It is not my aim to be outspoken, merely to make you understand that my claims are legitimate and my request for a private audience with you is not a random concoction of some grasping mercenary.”
“You speak to me of the validity of your claims? When I can already tell that the first two words out of your mouth were a lie.”
Jaime tried to remain impassive. “I can assure you there were not.”
“I will ask you one more time – what is your name?”

A even larger crowd had gathered. The room filled with ears. The Evenstar would make an example of him one way or another. “I told you – Duncan Bluestone.”
“I do not believe you 'Duncan Bluestone', you have the carriage and vocabulary of a highborn.”
“Perhaps if we were given that chance to speak...”
“You have had your chance to speak – now. And you squander it on lies.”
“Can you not see the complexity of the situation?” Jaime's annoyance was getting the better of him.
“Your refusal to speak with me in private is causing our conversation to run in circles.”
“This audience is over. I will not parley with liars.”
“You have not provided a suitable environment for me to be able to tell you the truth. It is criminally unfair to dismiss me as a liar because of it.”
“So you admit that you were lying to me.” The Evenstar was perversely triumphant. “Guards, take him away and put him back on a boat from whence he came.”

Jaime forgot himself. He had spent his life as a liege Lord and this was ridiculous.
“Gods you truly are the most infuriatingly obstinate family in the History of the Seven Kingdoms! I used to think no one could match Brienne in stubbornness but now I'm starting to think her dosage of the trait is mild! Clearly her mother passed down to her some semblance of common sense because you are truly in a league all of your own!”

The Evenstar raised in his seat. Guards flanked Jaime to either side.
“Don't you dare, say another word about my wife or my daughter. You know nothing about them!”
“That isn't so!” Jaime declared brazenly. “Nothing is more hateful than failing to protect the one you love.” A look of shock and sorrow crossed the Evenstar's face. “That's their creed isn't it?”
“Guards -” Lord Selwyn raised a hand for them to stop. “Change of orders.....take him to the dungeon instead.”
Impressions

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of Jaime's outburst....

Chapter Notes

This one is for the book readers....
Something I just had to do. :)

So, perhaps I could have shown a little more humility.
Jaime sat propped up against the stone wall of the dungeon. He hadn't slept a wink.
Both due to the inhospitable conditions and the fact that he was sternly reprimanding himself.
He had ruined his chances at smoothing over the Evenstar and quite possibly jeopardised his future with Brienne.
If my wench were here she'd give me a thrashing. I wouldn't blame her, I feel like doing it myself.

Being in a high room again, had brought back all those old Lordly instincts.
Lannister – Hear Me Roar. Jaime had completely forgotten that he was supposed to be modest.
A simple-man beseeching a proud liege to hear his tale. Lord Selwyn didn't know him, had not the slightest clue as to why this man would have any attachment to his daughter. And now after Jaime's reckless display it seemed even less plausible.

He groaned. It wasn't entirely his fault, the Tarths had this tendency to exasperate him.
Brienne tried his patience like no one else ever could - but in this delightful mulish way that he knew eventually he would kiss from her lips.
It only served to raise his blood and made everything they did more exciting. Sometimes, he would vex her on purpose just so they could spar.
They were never better than when both of them had steam coming out their ears.
The same was not true for her father. What have I done?
His head was beginning to ache just to add to the quandary.

Jaime heard keys in the lock and sat up straighter. An old woman was let into his cell.
From her garb he would place her as a Septa. Two guards hovered just outside the door, watching intently.
Great, he's putting me to death and he's sent the Crone herself to lead the way.
“I've brought you breakfast. Courtesy of Lord Selwyn. We are civilised here in Tarth, treating even our prisoners with decency.”
“How thoughtful.” Jaime wondered if sarcasm would be lost on her.
She scowled at him. “You should be thanking me. I volunteered myself to come and speak with you. Risking my own safety to instill some moral awareness.” The Septa glowered down at him.
Her frail frame still somehow allowing her to appear imposing. “Falsifying is a grievous sin. Especially to someone as gracious as our Lord Selwyn.”
“I take it you know him well.” Maybe I should try and get her on side?
“I have served in this household for well over four decades. By the Light of the Seven I know him well.”

Jaime sat forward. He thought she’d be dead or moved on. *I know this old bitch by reputation.*

“Septa Roelle?”

“Oh!” She jumped back slightly as if she’d been struck. “What black arts do you dabble in?! How do you know my name?”

“I should be asking you the same question.”

At least she had the nerve to look affronted. “Why, whatever do you mean?”

Jaime decided if he was going to be either hanged or deported he may as well achieve one thing worthwhile.

This particular topic had struck a very deep chord with him.

“Tell me - do you serve some dark master whom compels you to be unnecessarily cruel or are you just sadistic of nature?”

“I am a Holy Woman!”

“One who seemed to get pleasure out of tormenting her innocent young charge and destroying self confidence. What precisely did Brienne ever do to deserve such contempt from you? Someone who was entrusted to guide her and be there for her in the absence of her Mother. Yet you chose to unabatingly callous.”

The old hag was defiant. “I tutored Lady Tarth to the best of my ability, though the Seven sent me a trial they knew I would rise to the challenge.”

“A trial?! The maid was so self-conscious she was practically tongue tied! And why wouldn't she be? She was told how slow she was often enough.”

“Criticism that encourages self-improvement can never be negative. You would sit here in judgment of a Woman of Faith - I am not in a prisoner's cell for being a liar.”

“But according to me you should be.” Jaime shook his head emphatically. “What right did you have to hurt Brienne? To make her feel inferior because of her appearance...something she couldn't change? What are you! What do you know of men? You joined the Faith most likely because no man would ever want to touch you.” Finally some satisfaction. The Septa's mouth dropped open in shock at his words.

“Is that what made you bitter? Is that what turned your tongue to acid?” Jaime was relentless.

It had taken so much to get her to tell him. Nose to nose beneath their furs.

“Why do you think these things about yourself?” He'd asked. “Why are you so determined that I couldn't possibly feel about you the way I do?”

“I know what I am Ser Jaime. There is no point in denying it. Men may say nice things, but if I ever need to see the truth I will find it in my looking glass.”

He had been appalled at the notion. “What black-hearted person taught you that?”

“My Septa. She was very straight forward with me from an early age. Septa Roelle often reminded me of my faults. Freakish big. Mannish. I suppose she aimed to toughen me.”

“Did it work?”

Brienne had just smiled sadly at him. “You tell me. We are having this conversation.”

Septa Roelle haughtily pointed her nose in the air. “To speak the truth is not a sin nor crime and I was just voicing the thoughts of the many.”

“You disgust me.” Jaime knew he too had taunted Brienne in the beginning. It made him feel positively wretched now.

The trouble was he could no longer see the flaws which people highlighted. The superficialities had melted away and he could view her as nothing but beautiful. His vision permanently tinted by the hues of love.

And now he wanted to silence her tormentors. One at a time. He was very content to have started with this horrid woman.
She tutted, reclaiming the breakfast tray as though he weren't deserving of it. “I will pray for the Mother's Mercy upon your wicked soul. A prisoner, seeking to chastise a respectful senior Septa.”

As she departed the cell, Jaime heard the lock click back into place. He didn't believe he'd made a difference but at least he'd know he tried.

* * *

“Lord Selwyn, it is most unlike me to offer counsel or to interfere...” Septa Roelle stood in the front of the High Seat, the two safety guards behind her. She had just come from speaking with their prisoner. The Evenstar’s curiosity had been piqued when the old woman wanted to impart her opinions. “...But that prisoner drips poison from his tongue. He has knowledge. Information that can only be acquired through dark forces at play. We would be wise to rid ourselves of him immediately.”

Lord Selwyn himself did not believe in dark arts. The presence of such supernatural influence seemed a stretch to his practical mind. It was far more reasonable to assume that Duncan Bluestone had obtained his knowledge from more tangible means. “What sort of knowledge?”

“He knew my name. He knew who I was.” She was noticeably irritable about it. “Many residents of Tarth know these things. It is not a conclusion of blood magic.” “But it is My Lord! He knew specifics. Things that happened many years ago.”

“Like what?” The Evenstar wanted examples. The more he pressed the more uneasy Septa Roelle grew. He was starting to suspect there was more to this story. “Lessons I taught young Lady Tarth.”

Now Selwyn was interested. The knowledge could be proof that this main-lander was indeed sent by Brienne. “Why would this information be a concern? You tutored my daughter for years, one would think you would be happy to have your wisdom conveyed to another.”

“He bears false accusations My Lord! A liar through and through.” “What false accusations could there be Septa Roelle?”

The old woman shifted her feet uncomfortably. Lord Selwyn grew more concerned by the second. “He questioned my practices which were beyond reproach. He seems to believe my methods were harsh but that is not so.”

Creases furrowed Lord Selwyn’s brow as his face etched in concern. “Is there truth in it?” He asked her directly. “There is not. My teachings were impeccable and crucial to set Lady Tarth up in life.”

Behind her one of the guards faces flickered, registering a different reaction to what they were hearing. It was momentary but enough for the Evenstar to notice. “Andrew – you witnessed this conversation. Both of you did.” He gestured to the second guard. “Do you support what Septa Roelle has said?”

The two men exchanged furtive glances wondering whether to speak. Andrew finally found the confidence. “I may have heard a contrasting exchange from this one My Lord.”

“Tell me what you heard.” “The prisoner knew of Septa Roelle, like he had heard about her before. He spoke in defence of Lady Tarth. He claimed the Septa was cruel to her, making.....” Andrew looked nervous. “Derogatory remarks about her appearance and intellect. Both to which the Septa confessed and was unapologetic.” The other guard just nodded in agreement. Lord Selwyn's blood ran cold. I had no idea.

“Septa Roelle, I think it is past time that you returned to the clergy. Your time required as a
governess is long past and it would be unfair of us to keep you from serving your Faith any longer.” He turned to the guards. “Wesley, ensure a ship is arranged as soon as possible to escort Septa Roelle back to the mainland.”
“Yes My Lord.”
“And Andrew – fetch the prisoner to me.”

* * *

“Alright Duncan Bluestone.” The Evenstar turned around as Jaime entered his solar. “I'm still dubious about you and your intentions and I most certainly do not think you are who you claim to be. Yet – I believe that you know my daughter.”
“I do My Lord.” Jaime was humble. Hoping desperately for a second chance. “I was told to come here by her. She gave me that phrase. I know I shouldn't have wielded it the way I did. I apologise. I was out of line.”
“I cannot imagine how a personality like yours could come to know my daughter so well. You have details about her and her childhood here on Tarth even I was unaware of.”
“Don't be too self-critical, Brienne is not exactly forthcoming when talking about herself.” Lord Selwyn sighed. “We have belief now but not yet trust. What am I to do with you?”
“Allow me to stay. When the time is right your daughter will come and speak for me. That will remove all doubt.”

The Evenstar gestured for him to sit down.
“She will not be returning to Tarth. Most likely never again.”
“I'm sorry to correct you but she fully intends to – it is in our arrangement. It will just take time.”
The older man shook his head, muttering to himself. “That's why she came. It was never about the position.” Jaime watched him with confusion.
“I must be the bearer of bad news, my daughter has already visited Tarth. Been and gone, rather swiftly I might add. Her new posting leaves her unable to abandon her duty.”
All the blood drained from Jaime's face. “What have I missed? You are telling me our paths have not crossed....Lord Selwyn, please where is she?”
“My Daughter resides in King's Landing, in the service of King Bran the Broken. She is Lady Commander of his Kings Guard.”
The temperature was perfect. A harmonious blend of midday sunshine and crisp air. The overarching scent of salt from the ocean reminding you of its proximity even when it was out of sight.
On the far side of the castle, Jaime tapped his tourney sword against the pavers. The square was large, tiled almost in its entirety, ringed by stables and the armoury. Evenfall Hall with its many windows and balconies rose tall and formidable directly behind, giving the impression of an amphitheater. Smith's hammered, children scampered on the outskirts and stable-hands went about their work.

Jaime was just glad to have some variety of weapon in hand. Even after a few weeks had passed, obtaining permission to practice at swordplay had taken considerable convincing. Prior to that Jaime had fancied himself a prospective candidate to become the castle's new Master at Arms. Brienne once told him that Ser Goodwin - who previously held the position and oversaw her own training - had passed away several years ago. But once again Jaime's ego had encouraged him to reach too high, too fast, too far. Arming him had not been foremost on the Lord's priority list.

Jaime was seldom idle, his days divided between numerous menial pursuits to make himself useful. Lord Selwyn did not have a place in his stronghold for slackers. They had come to a mutual understanding if not a touch reluctant on the Evenstar's part. Duncan Bluestone had been granted leave to remain at Evenfall Hall. On proviso, a trial by observation so to speak. He had to gain trust, a commodity he was assured would be earnt through time rather than fancy words.

For once in his life the former lion did not argue, earnestly grateful for being allowed to stay. He was well provided for, outfitted with new clothes and a modest sleeping quarters. He was gaining weight and over the last week his muscle memory had begun to recover as he took out all his pent up frustrations against invisible foes or practice dummies.
Jaime really did need a fighting partner but the garrison trained in the morning when he was otherwise occupied in stable duties. Sometimes he would watch them from the sidelines, thinking how much he could improve upon their skills but knowing there was little he could do given present circumstances. *Their loss.*

A strange prickling sensation twitched at the base of his neck, prompting Jaime to scan the surrounding windows above.
It was less a physical manifestation and more a sensory awareness. Lord Selwyn himself was a figure Jaime had not seen much of late. Though he often felt his watchful gaze. Talk amongst the castle staff said that he had fallen poorly and taken to remaining in his quarters until he returned to full health. Ever proud, the Evenstar did not wish to be seen by his subjects in a weakened state. Jaime perceived yet another similarity between father and daughter – Brienne too, was loath to accept any moment of weakness on her part.

Contrary to his original assertions, Lord Selwyn had made the volitional decision that he no longer wished to know Jaime's real identity. He felt it may compromise his impartiality in carrying out his daughter's wishes. Although it inhibited the opportunity to create a bond with the Evenstar, Jaime had to admit he had exhaled a sigh of relief. Somehow revealing oneself as the Kingslayer sounded like a one way trip to imprisonment and eventual death.

The disclosure of the new playing field had been a startling revelation. His period spent in the disconnected little infirm, allowing the new cyvasse pieces time to arrange themselves.

King Bran Stark. The thought gave him shivers. It almost disturbed him as much as the idea that his own sweet swordswench was protecting the little deviant. Jaime's opinion of the boy had not warmed. If anything after what he witnessed in King's Landing it had plummeted. The Raven whisperer knew. He had to have known.

How many people was he willing to see slaughtered and sacrificed so he could seat himself upon an iron chair?

Though according to rumour that was gone as well. Melted to a puddle. The small mercy was that the kingdom had not passed to the Dragon Queen. He had rung the bells signalling the cities surrender and her resulting bloodlust left her undeserving of any reward besides death. Even her described stabbing being too clean and kind an end given what he'd seen.

Jaime sighed. His heart twisted painfully in his chest. In his mind's eye he pictured where his woman dwelt at that very moment. Knew exactly which halls she walked, which rooms and doors she guarded. Though it was difficult for him to alter their appearance, decaying them to an even drearier shadow of a Keep marred by ash and desolation. Perhaps most were ruin and his envisionment was all wrong. He was certain of one detail though, her image crystal clear.....

Lady Commander – capable, astonishing and deserving – but so very far from his arms.

How fate could so cruelly reset their positions so he sat where she blossomed and she stood where he slowly smothered for all those years.

Each night he wracked his brain until it felt mangled, to the point where headaches seized and even candlelight produced agony. Turning the situation over and over, chronically probing for answers. Every avenue of approach he contrived ended in a brick wall. An impenetrable blockade separating him from his Lady Knight. It was proving detrimental.

As a last resort he had begun praying. Beseeching the Crone to light their way, guide them slowly back to each other. He would ask the Maiden to watch over Brienne, reasoning that although it seemed outside her dominion, never could she find a woman with a more pure or innocent heart, worthy of her protection. And the Warrior to keep her strong; though thankfully during this reprieve there were no wars to fight.

The clattering of wooden swordplay echoed across the square, bouncing across the cobbled stones to reach his ears. Jaime turned around in wonder – he had been lead to believe his training time was solitary. It was with amusement that he located the source of the clangour.

A handful of smallfolk children, presumably belonging to the castle workers, were brandishing sticks and clobbering away at each other. Jaime stopped to observe them, their reckless glee making him reminiscent of his own youth at the Rock.
The boys clearly thought themselves ferocious, faces scrunched in concentration as they attempted to disarm each other. The watchers egged them on, too timid themselves to try but keen to spectate the downfall of their friends. Eventually one lad used quite a dirty trick to send the other tumbling backwards. *He fights like Bronn.* Scraped hands and knees the casualty of defeat.

Ever boastful the boy did a victory lap, raising his branch and challenging anyone to beat him. The only courageous taker was a small brunette girl, only two thirds his height but highly spirited. The reigning champion was having none of it. “You can't fight, you're a girl!”

“Yes I can! You're just scared!” Jaime chuckled. *They breed them tough in Tarth.*

“Go home and sew something.” He pushed her but she pushed right back.

“You sew! I wanna battle!”

“We're Knights! We're in a melee. You can't join. Girls can't be Knights.”

Jaime had heard enough. “Actually your wrong about that.” They hadn't even noticed him approach. “And I wouldn't let your liege Lady ever catch you saying it either.”

The boy shrunk, instantly submissive in the presence of an adult.

Little Miss Spitfire was not so easily deterred. Jaime just smirked. “Because of all the Houses in Westeros this island is ruled by the Tarths and Ser Brienne Tarth of Evenfall Hall just happens to be the first female Knight in the history of the Six Kingdoms.”

“Nu uh. Not possible.” *Look our boy warrior found his voice.*

“It is true. I was there. I saw it. She was dubbed with a Valyrian Blade named Widow's Wail.”

This seemed to impress them immensely. Tales of Swords and Knights were always popular amongst children of their age. Jaime had never gotten to share stories with his own offspring.

“Where is she now?” Spitfire again. It would seem this aspiring female champion had just found a new idol – his beloved.

Jaime sighed. “Serving the King, as Lady Commander of the Kingsguard. For a Knight there is no higher honour.”

“They wear white capes right?” Another lad from the crowd.

“Yes – and gold armour.....”

* * *

Jaime wasn’t sure exactly how it had happened but he always openly admitted he enjoyed having an audience. Very few people directly spoke with him at Evenfall Hall after his initial display on arrival. He had found himself lonely and he loved to spin a good yarn. So what if his listeners were younger than his preferred crowd? At least they gave him undivided attention and an opportunity to talk about Brienne.

After his initial tale of the First Female Knight, he had somehow ended up showing the rascals how to correctly wield their stick swords. He had told them all in the strictest of confidence that he was indeed a Knight – knowing full well that they'd tell everyone - and secretly keen for the information to circulate. He could be a hedge knight. Gain him back the title of Ser. It couldn't hurt.

The small gathering of children had become a daily occurrence. They just sort of appeared at the Square around noon. Looking up at him sheepishly until one was brave enough to speak up and request another anecdote. At first he had found it difficult to adapt the many stories into something suitable for little ears but now he was used to it. Occasionally pangs of heartache for Tommen and Myrcella seized him as he looked upon their little faces. Then a follow up feeling of guilt would ensue for having no such affections for Joffrey. *Awful boy that one – all Cersei.* That was his claim and he was sticking to it.
“Where were we?” He asked them.
“The real story of the Bear and the Maiden Fair.”
“No – the Bear, the Maiden and the Jackanapes.” He spoke animatedly so they laughed. *They are quite adorable.* “Now let’s see....Once in a giant castle, some very bad men had captured our strong Warrior Maiden and the Jackanapes she was escorting across the countryside....” One boy furrowed his brow. “How did that happen?”
“Jackanapes did something very stupid, he thought he could fight her with both hands bound.”
“That was a mistake.”
“Correct.”
“Is the Warrior Maiden our Lady Tarth?” *She's an astute little fighter this one.*
“I couldn't say.” He gave an over-exaggerated wink and nodded. “Anyway – the sound from the fight got them both captured for they were, very, very outnumbered.” *Time to skip over some unsavoury details.* “They were taken to an enormous castle. Where the Jackanapes was set free but the Maid was kept for a ransom....do we know what that is?”
“Gold to get someone back safe.” A young boy.
“How in Seven Hell's do you know that?”
“Me uncles a brigand on the mainland.” *Less I know about that family the better.*
“Fair enough. Now Jackanapes did not want to leave her there....but the brave and selfless woman told him to go and escape whilst he could. He thought they would accept the gold and she would be set free. But no – they were very bad people.”
“What happened?” They all leant forward, eager for the next part.
“Jackanapes heard that they had refused the 300 Gold Dragons for the Maiden's release.” His ears were met with sounds of awe at the sum of money. “So he rode back to the castle as fast as his horse could gallop. When he arrived he heard a well known song being sung about a Bear and a Maiden......” A few of the children felt it necessary to sing some lines.
“....And following the sound discovered to his dismay that the courageous Maid was in a pit, facing off against a giant, towering, enraged bear! Armed with only a wooden sword.” Now they were horrified. The children were so expressive this would never get old.
“Nevertheless she was battling bravely, determined not to show fear. The Jackanapes raced to the bad man and offered him a bigger Ransom. Gold! Sapphires! Anything just to get her out of there. But the wicked man refused. He liked watching the fight. He said it made him happy.”
“What did Jackanapes do?”
“Well he didn't have time to think it through so he did the only thing he could...he jumped into the bear pit with her.”
“That was dumb.”
Jaime frowned. “Yes but very heroic!” He shook off the insult. *Children are guileless.*
“Jackanapes told the Maid to get behind him but she refused even though she was injured and bleeding. So he moved her behind him anyway to protect her and distract the bear. That was when his guarded escort caught up and shot the fearsome creature with a crossbow bolt!”
Their mouths dropped open. “But the bear was not killed, instead he grew angrier. It Readied to charge, growling and pawing at the ground.....”

* * *

Unbeknownst to those assembled below Lord Selwyn had developed a new routine. Around noon each day he would sit at one of the low windows, quietly observing their mysterious guest as he enthralled the local children with stories before instructing them in the basics of swordplay. The Evenstar had found it an invaluable insight into the true nature of the man who claimed to be Ser Duncan Bluestone.

More astute than the intended audience he had deduced long before today that indeed the Warrior Maiden who featured highly in all the tales was his own daughter Brienne.
The Maiden and the Wights, The Maiden Meets the Hateful Queen, The Maiden's Valyrian Sword.
But even more interestingly – he was starting to believe that the hapless companion oft mentioned
was in fact the person narrating.
It would seem Brienne and this man's history were very much entwined.

“So they saved each other?” One boy enquired.
“Yes. Neither could have survived if the other one hadn't been right there beside them.”
“That's boring!” A more outspoken lad. “I could make it on my own! I'd take on fifty bears!”
Lord Selwyn suppressed a chuckle at the boys arrogance.
Duncan just sniggered. “Well what a shame you weren't there, they could have used you.”
The fiesty little girl roughly elbowed her comrade. “Lackwit! You're missing the point!”
Rubbing the point of impact, he was stupefied. “How? I don't need a girl to save me.”
“The Warrior Maid and the Jackanapes are clearly in love!”
Lord Selwyn's eyes quickly passed to observe the reaction of Ser Bluestone.
*Mayhaps the child is more perceptive than I.....*

Duncan said nothing but his face was transformed by a euphoric knowing smile.
“Come on! Get your sticks, it's about time we worked on your stances.”

Lord Selwyn gestured for one of his attendants.
“Ensure Ser Duncan is brought to me this evening. I would have supper with him.”
Profound

Chapter Summary

Conversation time...

Chapter Notes

I can feel us hurtling towards the business end of things now as I tick another item off my to do list. The long overdue chat between Jaime and Selwyn. :)

“I was not initially aware that you claim to be a Knight Ser Duncan.” The Evenstar sat across from him at a modest dining table within the Lord's quarters. It could have comfortably seated eight, yet still they arranged themselves in close proximity, all the better to converse.

He had been invited to supper, a generous three course meal with wine. Jaime would have been suspicious if he weren't certain of the Tarth family's strict scruples. He was protected under guest right and they were sticklers for propriety. He was also incredibly pleased. The term 'good father' swimming through his wine befuddled head.

It may have been making him talk a tad excessively but he didn't mind. Jaime had finally gotten his proper opportunity with the Evenstar and he did not want to appear ungrateful.

“That I am.” Jaime replied. “But not a True Knight, that is one thing I don't claim to be.” Honesty is always the best policy; That is what Brienne had lead him to believe. He added his own wrinkle; As long as it is applied with reason.

“Should you not aspire?” Ahhhh, there is where my Lady gets her lofty ideals from. “Too little, too late I'm afraid. But your daughter.....” He sipped his wine. “She is the example to measure all chivalry by. Embodying every aspect I fall short on. A Truer Knight there never shall be.” Jaime raised his glass in toast with a smile.

Lord Selwyn seemed concerned. “You speak very highly of her.” “Of course, why wouldn't I?” He hoped the Evenstar hadn't thought the statement a jape. The older Lord frowned. “Many don't. She has been subject to much ridicule. Moreso than I ever knew.”

It was with complete sincerity that Jaime responded. “The world is oft closeminded. People can't see further than the superficial nose on their face. It takes something truly cataclysmic to open their mind and force them to look beyond. I'm just glad I had an opportunity to come to my senses or else I hate to think where I would be or what would have become of me.”

“What was your turning point?”

Jaime lifted his stumped right arm in answer.
“Mmmm. That would be quite the awakening.”
He nodded. “I owe it to my maiming and your daughter. In truth mainly her. I viewed myself and my many failings reflected in her eyes and I didn't like what I saw. She made me want to change. I strove to improve her opinion of me. To become someone worthy of knowing her.”
Leaning forward he looked squarely at Lord Selwyn, so the older man would be able to read the earnestness of his words. Jaime wanted to remove any doubt that his next statement could be false.
“Brienne has a unique quality. She can bring out either the best or worst in people. It is a natural gift. Those whom exhibit the worst sadly make themselves feel better by inflicting cruel scars upon her innocent soul. For those in which she elevates the good, once you bask in her light...you cannot bear to recollect a time when you did not know her.
I am glad I am the latter. I shudder in shame when I admit there was a time I was the former. But through that epiphany I can assuredly state. The issue is with them – never her.”

A lightness overcame the Evenstar. A mixture of elation and fatherly pride that had long eluded Jaime himself. His briefest moment with Myrcella the closest he ever came to replicating the expression which he now beheld in Lord Selwyn.
It was with a softer, deeper tone that he framed his next enquiry. “What is your relationship to my daughter?”

Jaime was uncertain how Brienne would wish him to respond. He didn't want to incriminate her in any way - especially not by insinuating the change of the title 'Maid of Tarth' to contain the word 'former' - but moreso he didn't want to diminish their relationship. “It is complex....and it is deep. We have known each other a long time. Been through so much.” He sighed. “A bond as solidified as ours can only be born through the trials we have faced and the adversaries and undefeatable odds we have triumphed against – together.” Jaime smiled as he added. “I can't imagine a life without her. I don't want to either.”
Her father was deep in thought. Jaime held his breath wondering if he had provided an acceptable answer. After what felt like an eternity the Evenstar spoke again. “I heard you make mention of the sum of 300 gold dragons. That is a very specific fact. One that plagued me for many a sleepless night when it was never accepted. She mentioned it as well when she was here.”
“If you don't mind my asking, how did that topic come up?”
“We quarreled. Over her future. Brienne and I did not part on good terms.”
Jaime registered surprise only to smile compassionately. “I have been on the receiving end of Ser Brienne in the grips of ire. I empathise. Once she has set her mind on something, there can be no swaying her. But I'm sure she loves you Lord Selwyn.”

The Evenstar exhaled loudly. “You know her well.”
“I do.”
“Tell me – was the story you were telling the children true? About the bear pit?”
“Sadly yes.”
“I didn't completely make sense.”
“Well, I had to gloss over some of the less savoury details.” Jaime hastily drained his wine cup. This chat is becoming heavy.
“She was nearly mauled to death by a bear?”
“Don't do that to yourself.” Jaime advised strongly. “No good can come of it.” He knew. Blood streaming from his daughter's nose frequently haunted his dreams.
“I honestly thought I offered a large enough ransom.”
“You did. It was formidable. I thought so. They just had greater expectations.....” Confession time.
“That's my fault anyway.”
“Howso?”
“I may have opened my mouth and convinced them Tarth had Sapphires.”
“Whyever for?”
Jaime's mouth set in a grim line. Should I tell him? Brienne had told an entire room full of people in Winterfell to save him.
“We were taken prisoner by the worst variety of outlaws, they were rats. Bottom-dwellers without equal. The situation was dire.”
“How dire?”
Jaime knew Selwyn was a smart man. “What do a group of lowborn letches do when they capture a noblelady?”
Her father turned ashen.
“It's alright – it was prevented.” The older man looked at him for further explanation.
“I convinced them you would pay a prodigious ransom if she was left unbesmirched.” He gave Lord Selwyn a wry grin. “Might have overplayed my hand but desperate times, desperate measures.”
“Did your gall not anger them?”
The former lion lifted his eyebrows and his right arm again.
Realisation dawned on the face of the Evenstar.
“She's worth it.” Jaime said simply. “The bear pit came after.”

Lord Selwyn was solemn. “I owe you a debt of gratitude.”
“No you don't.” He shook his head. “It was my choice. I did it for her. And she saved me right back. She is not a fragile flower, she was there with me every step of the way. Fighting tooth and claw, pushing me on, keeping me alive.”

“And the other tales as well? The undead creatures? The sword? The bear pit?”
“Knights live colourful lives.”
“So much I have missed. She was right.”
“It's not too late Lord Selwyn.”

“I need to ask you something and I implore you to answer me with absolute honesty.”
“Everything I've said tonight has been true. I have no plans to lie now.”
“Aright.” The older man nodded in acceptance. “Without revealing your name...as I mentioned previously, I ascertained based off your speech alone that you are highborn. Now from your tales I am even more sure. Am I correct? Were you a Lord once?”
Time to come clean.
“Yes. I am. I was.”
“You are no longer?”
“That is also true.”
“Does anyone know where you are or that you live?”
“Only Brienne but – sadly circumstances have not gone according to plan. I firmly believe she thinks me now dead as well.”
“She does.”
“How do you know?”
The Lord looked distant as though he was reliving something painful. “She fled the room, directly after asking me if anyone had arrived on Tarth. I of course said there hadn't been. She had already begun to cry, as if she couldn't contain it....”

Jaime felt his own eyes begin to burn as he pictured the scene unfolding.
I'm here wench. It took longer than I expected but I'm here. I came, like I promised.
He fought them back. Lord Selwyn watched him intently.
“I need to see her.” His voice was hoarse, choked by emotion. “It has been too long.”

“I must tell you something, Ser Duncan – purely because I have nothing else to call you by.
I have been unwell. It pains me to admit but I can feel my age catching up. I am not as spry as I once was. Nor do I recover as completely. I want to trust you as Brienne does. I want to work with you....” The Evenstar was steely as he vowed.
“....We will get her here.” He tapped the table for emphasis. “In the meantime - I have a new position for you.”
His doublet was fine, far more the quality to which he had been accustomed. Its breast was adorned with the embroidered standard of House Tarth. Jaime had opted for the blue doublet, not wishing to wake memories should any travellers glimpse him in Red down by the docks. The realisation that their house colours were similar becoming just another precursor of fate sealing them together.

It was strange to serve under another's banner - but being Brienne's it felt natural. Moreso of late as he and the Evenstar had bonded. They were very different characters but unified through their common affection for one particular person. A respect had grown between the two men, Duncan had brought Lord Selwyn the knowledge he desperately sought. The missing pieces of the enigma that his daughter had become. Through the younger Knight's eyes he saw her true form, bridging their divide. To Jaime, Lord Selwyn was just an older, slightly more cantakerous male version of Brienne and he was keen to look after anyone she cared about, who loved her as he did.

“Ser Duncan, the Swiftwind has arrived back in port.”
“Thank you Wesley. Have the Captain brought to me as soon as he is able.”
“Yes, Ser.”
Jaime walked the ramparts and tried to make out the shape of this particular ship in the distance.

In his first few days of appointment he and the Evenstar had done nothing but talk. Learning his new responsibilities and the key names of importance in the Evenfall Household. In addition he had issued some requests, which Lord Selwyn had been kind enough to grant. Jaime asked for a small allotment of funds to promote his independence, no grandiose sum but a wage nonetheless. This was agreed to, the consensus being that it was only just he receive a Castellan's wage considering the workload he was taking upon his shoulders.
He had then spoken of the Infirmary, the wondrous work they did and how he wouldn't be here without them. This had greatly impressed the Lord who very happily agreed to send charitable supplies. A noble cause and one worth supporting.
The Swiftwind was despatched not long after.

On the day the ship set sail, Ser Duncan had entrusted the Captain, a long standing Admiral in the Evenstar's fleet with a pouch of coin and a parchment contract. Issuing instructions to collect a certain ring from a marketplace....

Jaime grinned. Everything was falling into place.
He took the stairs two at a time as he made his way across the castle, weaving in and out of hallways which he'd come to know like the back of his hand.
Knocking briefly - without pausing for answer - Jaime, burst his way into the Evenstar's quarters.
“Lord Selwyn, I will have news from the mainland tonight. The Swiftwind has returned.”
He stopped short as he noticed the Maester emerging from the bedchamber. “Ser Bluestone.”
“Maester Bextor is everything all right?” His voice reflected concern.
“He is not getting any younger though he is not keen to accept it.” The Maester sighed. “Today is not a good day.”

Jaime nodded, the Evenstar's latest bout of ill health had made a resurgence and was not keen to release its grip. He tentatively pushed the door open. “Lord Selwyn. I saw the Maester leave.”

“I wager you did. I have no choice but to see him every single day. One could get tired of the sight of him. Especially when he never tells me anything I wish to hear.”

“What did he say today?”

“I must remain abed.”

“Cheer up. That's why you promoted me. So I can complete all the incredibly boring tasks you no longer wish to do. The jig is up. It's all a farce.” Not so much as a snigger. The older man did not register any mirth at his words.

“I would be amused if I weren't the one watching his health rapidly decline.” Right, one of those moods.

Jaime fell silent and sat on the chair next to the bed.

“What do you need me to do today?”

The Evenstar stared at the ceiling, deep in contemplation. Finally he declared. “I think it may be time.”

“Time for what?”

“Duncan - I don't want to admit my age. Much less that my body has started deteriorating whether I want it to or not. But denial is not going to set these wheels in motion. Nor is my pride. It's time to take a bitter pill.” He eyed Jaime knowingly. “For the betterment of the next generation.”

Curiosity piqued, the former lion leant forward, arching one eyebrow. “Why whatever do you mean?”

“I am going to need a message sent.”

“I can organise that. What saying?”

“It needs to address my ill health, making it sound worse than it actually is. Death's door in fact. I do not relish it. Such knowledge could make Tarth look weak. Instill pity. Yet – it is the method I believe. My pride will take the fall to bring it about.”

Jaime tried to read between the lines a smile slowly creeping across his face.

“Who are we sending this message to?”

* * *

In the rookery Jaime dubiously avoided the Ravens, trying to obscure his face from their view. He didn't trust those beady black eyes.

“Maester Bextor. At the behest of Lord Selwyn, we need to send an urgent message. You must write it, but I will tell you what to say.”

“Certainly Ser Bluestone at once. Where is it headed?”

He was glad to say the destination aloud. “Kings Landing.”
Forbearance

Chapter Summary

Time to visit with our leading lady. . .

Chapter Notes

This is so much fun, now we all know where the next few chapters are headed! ;)
There is some lengthy ones coming up....believe me!
Tonight's bridging chapter is a Brienne POV.

Ofttimes I wonder, which of the Seven I so grievously angered that condemned me to a lifetime of listening to such foolishness.
The council meeting ran overtime, as per usual, whilst the men whom surrounded her made increasingly more ludicrous suggestions, coupled with off topic smalltalk.

“Increasing the taxes on brothels although unpopular is a readily viable source of revenue. I should know, my father imposed a penny tax once before.” Tyrion tried to conciliate. “The newly rebuilt Street of Silk sees more financial growth than any other trade in King’s Landing.”
“Yeah, business is booming. I’d know, I paid to rebuild them! Those girls are hard working – half of us have tried ’em out – them and their loyal clientele do not deserve to pay more just to line the crown's pockets.” Whose idea was it to put a sellsword on the Small Council?

Ser Davos frowned. “I think our Master of Coin is missing the point of his job.”
“I ain't missing the point, you're Master of Ships.” Bronn pointed to accentuate his point. “How happy do you think the sailors are gonna be when they arrive in port to find the most overpriced whores this side of Essos?”
“One might presume they'd be so desperate they'd pay it anyway.” Tyrion ventured. “After months at sea.”
“It's not morally right!” The Lord of Highgarden banged his fist against the table. “Same service, higher price? I'd pull anchor and go elsewhere.”
“While we're on the topic of morals - perhaps the taxes could be seen as a welcome deterrent to this ever increasing trade.” Brienne tried to have an input, though most of the time it went ignored. Right now Ser Bronn looked at her as though she had grown a second head.
“You would say that wouldn't ya?” She ignored the dig. Being the only woman on this council of dolts was a downside to her job.
Grand Maester Tarly looked as out of place as she did. He smiled at her sympathetically.

“Perhaps we could tax in accordance to the quality of service....” Tyrion thought aloud. “That way we could accurately reflect what the clientele can afford and garnish accordingly.”
“I like that -” Bronn chimed in. “But we'd need a sort of....” He rubbed his hands together excitedly. “Quality control officer. You know someone to test that the cost matches the services provided.”
How does their conversation always circle back to this topic?
The former Maid of Tarth would never understand the principals of pleasure houses and their workers. She could only ever imagine wrapping her legs around the man she loved. 

*Jaime...* During the waking hours she tried to banish thoughts of him from her mind, focusing solely on her work. Pretending the love in her life never existed at least temporarily kept the loneliness at bay. No good could come from listening to her aching chest. Brienne breathed heavily, trying her best to tune out the idiocracy and counting the seconds until the unmitigated torture was over.

* * *

Finally the meeting was adjourned, the Lady Knight stood hastily, keen to stretch her stiffened muscles. *That took far too long.* 

Upon rising, she once again found small satisfaction in being noticeably taller than every man at the table. 

What limited amusements she could enjoy. 

Maester Tarly's voice stopped her before she exited the room. “Lady Commander!”

“Yes Grand Maester?” She turned to face him. 

“I wanted to speak with you before the meeting but there wasn't time.” He set his mouth in an apologetic line. “A raven arrived this morning, from Tarth. It's message is intended for you.” 

Anxiety creased between her brows. “It must be from my Father.” 

Samwell nodded, producing the scroll of parchment from beneath his sleeve. “I haven't read it. The seal is not broken.” 

Brienne took it from him and examined it carefully. The sigil of Tarth was pressed into the wax and beneath it was her name. 

She was flummoxed, *dark wings, dark words.* 

“Thank you, Maester Tarly.” 

“I hope it's contents are not too troubling.” The kindly man made a hasty retreat. 

Brienne gripped the scroll in one gloved hand, tapping it anxiously against the opposite palm. *Something must be wrong – I never receive messages.* 

Her boots clomped heavily against the wooden floorboards as she navigated the halls. 

Oathkeeper tapped a steady rhythm against her armoured thigh as she walked with purpose back towards the White Sword Tower. 

“Ser Podrick!” She found him eating at a table in the common room. 

He scrambled to his feet when she entered. “Yes Lady Commander.” 

“I would ask a favour – if you would be so kind. My shift is next to guard the King but....” She glanced nervously at the message in her hand. “A raven has come from Tarth, I do not know what news it brings. Can you take my post for me? I will relieve you once it is read.” 

“Of course My Lady.” He nodded in deference although he seemed worried for her. 

Out of all the miserable things that had unfolded, Brienne could be comforted by the small blessings. The ability to Knight and promote Podrick to within the King's Guard an honour she felt privileged to bestow. He had been a faithful squire and was an even more exemplary Knight. She always felt lucky to have him under her command. Though she frequently had to remind herself he was no longer the timid boy she trained and instead a man grown. It was easy to forget, around her he often reverted, much to her entertainment. 

*It is nice to have at least one person genuinely respect you.* 

Climbing the stairs she unlocked the door to her chambers. 

As she entered and fastened it shut behind her, she felt the familiar flood of relief that she was finally off show. 

The one place where she could be herself and didn't have to conceal her feelings. An escape from their judgments and scrutiny. It was uncommon to find herself here in the daytime but then again – the arrival of a letter for her was an even rarer occurrence. Sitting down she removed her black
gloves and broke the wax seal with tentative fingers. Slowly unraveling the scroll to unveil its contents.

Dear Lady Commander Tarth,

It is with a heavy heart that this message is writ. I can only hope these few short phrases correctly convey the earnestness and urgency of its contents. Your father's health ails in a rapid decline. Lord Selwyn has been confined to his bedchamber, attended daily by his Maester. The Evenstar has expressed his deepest regrets surrounding the terms on which you last parted. It would ease his soul in this trying time, if you could take a compassionate leave of absence and return to Evenfall Hall. As I'm sure you are aware, family is of the utmost importance and second chances are hard come by. Once someone is gone, it is that left unsaid which pains the most.

I urge you to depart, poste haste.

Sincerely,
Ser Duncan Bluestone
Castellan of Evenfall Hall, Tarth

Brienne released her hold on the parchment, letting it flutter down into her lap. Her head swam. If Father appointed a Castellan to act in his stead, it must be serious. However, taking a hiatus from being Lady Commander felt like a dereliction of duty. Other Lord Commanders have traveled to fight in wars. Surely this cannot be much different. Of course she would go. He was her father, her kin. The insightful words of this unknown Castellan rang true. She knew of deep wounds, they burrowed into regrets, birthed from declarations remaining unspoken. Chances lost forever.

Infused with resolve, she strode from her chambers.

* * *

“I will take it from here Podrick.”
The younger Knight smiled and stepped aside. Brienne walked out onto the terrace. A vast expanse built seemingly into the sky. Without roof nor railings the cement fixture allowed one to stare out into infinity. That is precisely what the King did there. Whenever the Kingsguard rolled out his chair, they were certain to secure the wheels, only releasing their grip when they rested in the chiseled grooves. This location was always closely guarded by them for it was fraught with risk, but the King maintained it was the only place where he felt truly free. The endless views of the city below, stretching uninterrupted to the waters of the bay and horizon beyond. It sometimes made Brienne feel queasy and she made certain to keep her distance from the edge. They rotated duties for the Terrace and whomever had a shift there the following day, was banned from consuming alcohol the night before. By order of the Lady Commander. Even the tiniest slip in judgment could be fatal.
“Your Grace.” His eyes were white. She knew he was not there. Patiently she awaited his return from the distant nether. Sometimes it took minutes, other instances hours.

He blinked. “Lady Commander.”

“I have received word of my Father your Grace.”

The King nodded. “A raven. Ser Podrick told me. I questioned your absence.”

“My apologies.”

Bran inclined his head slightly, accepting her words. “It's contents?”

“He is unwell. I fear his time in this world may be coming to an end.”

“Yes - it seems sorrowful but time flows on. We are all just grains of sand in its immeasurable desert.”

Brienne pursed her lips, sometimes their King could seem devoid of feeling.

“I wish to see him one last time Your Grace. Be with him when the moment comes. I would respectfully request a leave of absence.”

His face almost flickered with a reaction. But the emotion was difficult to read.

“Did you not make your peace already?”

The Lady Knight sighed. “I requested his blessing – yes. But we disagreed and did not part on good terms. I left without his permission to assume my new role. I did not wish to disappoint you, having bestowed such an honour upon me.”

Jaime had once told her that flattery was best served with a dash of truth, to appear sincere.

“And you have served me well.”

“And you have served me well.”

“Thank you.” She paused. “If you had the chance to say goodbye to your own Lord Father – would you seize upon it?”

“I still see him. In the recesses of the past. But I cannot speak with him. I know I cannot interfere.”

The King became lost in thought. Brienne just waited, almost afraid to breathe.

“Who will lead whilst your gone?”

She did not hesitate. “Ser Podrick is entirely capable. I trust him implicitly.”

“Very well.”

Relief coursed through her veins, along with a strange surge of eagerness.

She wanted to escape, to get out of this viper's nest.

“I appreciate this, Your Grace.”

She made a hasty retreat to the back of the terrace. Assuming her post, outwardly rigid and unwavering.

But her mind already raced...compiling a list of preparations.

Brienne worried for her father. I just hope I get there in time.
Culmination

Chapter Summary

A homecoming, a reunion, a declaration... This chapter contains multiple POVs.

Chapter Notes

Here we are at Chapter 40 – I'm still nowhere near done. This is the longest chapter I have written to date, and it brings a smile to my face. The moment we have waited for my fellow shippers! Thank you for your continued faith in me. I adore you all! When I began a month ago I never thought I would actually have readers and together we have travelled so far. :D

Wordless. Speechless.
Such a status was nearly implausible to him, yet it persisted. He had nothing to say to the outside world, his thoughts occupied entirely by Brienne.... Jaime fidgeted with the hem of his sleeve, ensuring it was fully pulled over his stump. His insides a tangle of excited nerves. She is coming.

Ever since he received the message confirming her departure he had been barely able to contain his own anticipation. Willing the days, hours and minutes away. The knowledge of her drawing nearer making the wait unbearable. Trying to perform his duties as Castellan had become a monumental task.

Just a few days prior an unloading merchant ship had underestimated the weight of its cargo, cracking clean through the wooden dock and forcing them to close the port for repairs. Most vessels were now being redirected to neighbouring beaches and Jaime had made the executive decision that hers would be one of them. They would meet on the seashore, away from the crowds and prying eyes. Giving them what privacy they could.

The Evenstar remained confined to his chambers - which was probably a blessing, considering Jaime had been prone to irrational outbursts of late. Guards, dock workers and clerks had been on the receiving end of many a snappy retort as the pressure mounted and his patience frayed. He wanted everything to be perfect for her. At least the things he could control. For his insides felt far from settled. Conjuring several renditions of worst case scenarios...

What if she has moved on?
Wishes to continue in her life of honour and servitude?
Prefers the feel of the White Cloak to my arms?

He wouldn't blame her. All he had put her through, what loving each other had cost them. Jaime could fully understand why a heart may not recover. But his ached for her.
The fulfillment of his every purpose would be their reunion and now it glimmered upon the horizon.

Jaime squinted against the afternoon sun, slowly drawing the distant sails into focus. The small retinue of household guards and shiphands oblivious to the emotional upheaval he was experiencing within. In ignorance they carried out the preparations.

A hale wind guided her to them. He watched as the small rowboat was launched to meet with the galley and carry her across the final shallow stretch of her journey. Jaime shifted his feet in the sand. His breathing quickening despite his efforts to remain calm. *What will I say? All this time and he hadn't thought it through.*

He didn't want to pressure her. To make her feel obliged to return his affections. *Time had passed. I shouldn't corner her.* However, he suspected declarations may burst from his tongue. *Think of her....he urged himself. She deserves you to be considerate. . .*

Jaime's thoughts cut off mid stream. A hushed silence settling his mind, a suspension of time slowly extending throughout his entire being. His heart stopped mid beat, his breath caught in his throat. His internal monologue stalled and hastily disregarded as he glimpsed her. Rays of light glinted against her golden armour, wreathing her halo of blonde hair. *It has grown longer. He smiled to himself. She looks so serene.*

He hung back as the boat made ground. Rivetted to the spot by the mere sight of her. Jaime watched her white cape unfurl as she rose, billowing elegantly behind in the soft breeze. It made him feel half the child again, pawing over a storybook of chivalry and legend, gazing at the pictures in wonder for he had never been adept at reading. His Brienne was the artwork come to life and he could only gawk from the sidelines, dumbstruck and awe inspired. *How immaculate she is. Illustrious and pristine. Hers is the carriage of a heroine. The epitome of the ideal Knight. The likes of me should never soil her....she is everything I'm not.*

Yet as he watched her greet the guards, overwhelming feeling cours ed through his veins and flooded his eyes. *I have missed her so much....* Now her familiar tones filled his ears, whilst her face filled his sights. He needed her pressed close to him. *I must speak....before the guards give the game away. I must say something.....anything....*

“Wench!” She turned instantly at the sound of his voice. The beckoning of her private nickname. His tears continued to well unbidden as they looked directly at each other for the first time in so long. He could truly see those sapphire eyes, capturing the blue of the surrounding ocean. Ever cavalier, he favoured her with his trademark grin. “Better late than never hey?”

* * *

“Wench!” She knew his voice. At first thinking it a trick of her subconscious. She often heard him call to her - each time it stilled her pulse and then she faced the brutal reality once more that he was gone. But the man who stood slightly ahead had the stature of Jaime. The blonde hair streaked with the occasional grey. His full lips and tear brimmed eyes.
She knew his likeness even though it had altered...
She had traced the contours of those cheeks, that chin a thousand times. Feeling his warmth beneath her fingertips.
She would know him anywhere.
“Better late than never hey?” He managed a playful smile.
The one that was uniquely and unmistakably Jaime.

Brienne strode up the beach, her entire body quivering beneath her armour.  
*He is alive. How can he be alive?*  
All this time she had pined for him, mourned him.
Convinced herself he was lost to her forever.
She had fortified herself, turned a deaf ear to rumour, denied his passing.
Created impenetrable walls only to have them come tearing down.
Night after night chasing away visions of his seared and charred body. Clung closely to his sister.
Resigned herself to a world without him in it.
Sunk into a desolate void of existence where her love was lost and shades of memory were all that shook feeling into her numb soul.....
The whole time he still endured. Flesh and blood, breathing.
She saw red, through her pooling vision.
Fury the simplest of emotions to express amidst the myriad which plagued her.

* * *

Their collision was fierce as she hurtled towards him, slamming both hands against his chest with such force  
she knocked him backwards a step.
Jaime recovered quickly as she came at him again, the sheer violence with which she shoved him all the proof he needed....

They were warriors, their core was iron. But in each other lay their weakness.  
The chink in their armour the absence of their mate, their soul.
He knew she would leave bruises, he didn't care.  
*Fuck taking it slowly.*

Midswing he seized her hand in his, wrapping his right arm around her waist and pulling her close.  
Pressing his lips to hers in a fervent kiss, his intensity conveying more than words ever could.  
*He was hers, he would always be hers.*

* * *

Brienne knew she ought to struggle. To grapple for the sake of her own sanity.  
But her fight dissipated with the heat of his mouth.  
She needed the contact, the display of physical affection from him.  
She yearned for it, needing to know - to feel, to chase away any lingering doubts that he may be an illusion.  
Their lips duelled for supremacy, passionate desire winning out over all other sense.  
Jaime's kiss was raw and needy, his beard raking against her skin as she received him with reckless abandon.  
Her eyes stung, body quaking with frustration and relief. She never thought she would feel this again.

The warm strokes of his lips against hers, the relentlessness knocking the breath from her lungs.  
The jarring strength of his body even through the weight of her armour.
It almost felt physically painful when he pulled away, extricating himself from her just long enough to breathlessly whisper. “I love you.”

Without warning she launched herself into his arms, pulling him into a desperate crushing embrace. Jaime encircled her in return, as she pressed her cheek to his. Her stranglehold was fierce, she never wanted to let him go. She was reeling from his words, his presence. It was all so surreal. Brienne feared waking up. She knew she would not survive this time if it were revealed to be fantasy. But it isn’t.

* * *

He inhaled her scent, her proximity. The feel of her skin against his making his body thrum. Wherever she touched felt rejuvenated for the first time since they parted. Silents rivers cascaded down her cheek where they joined. A wash of waterfalls stemming from sapphire blue eyes. Jaime felt a solitary tear of his own break through, spilling freely to mingle with hers. Combining to tell their own tales of heartache and loss. Of fears and redemptions. Of reunions and fresh beginnings. Their own perfect harmony.

“I love you.” Her voice grazed his ear, thick with emotion, heralding the dawn of their new life. The first words she had spoken to him the most longed for phrase he could dream of.

* * *

Brienne trailed kisses along his jawline, changing course at his chin to return to his mouth. Jaime kissed her back with equal heat and passion, as they poured every second of longing into this one all-encompassing gesture.

“Jaime...” She rapturously murmured his name just to hear him reply. “Brienne.” Happiness permeated his response. She could feel his smile even through his kiss. It mirrored her own.

“My Lady...?” They were not alone. The timid voice of a distant guard sliced their ardour. Bringing her hurtling back to reality. A blush crept over her as she realised they’d been observed. She self consciously swiped away the tears of joy which stained her cheeks.

“Seven Hells Andrew!” Jaime rebuked. His tone commanding but kindly, arms falling to his sides. “See that Lady Tarth’s things are taken up to Evenfall Hall. I will be escorting her myself.” He winked at her on the opposite side to the guards. Brienne sheepishly kicked at the sand, she could not bring herself to face them.

“Right away Ser Bluestone.”

She faltered. “Ser Bluestone?” Jaime simply shrugged in reply. “You wrote my letter-?” “Dictated it actually, the Maester wrote it. Left hand.” He proffered an explanation which gave all the information she didn't need and none that she did. Already she sighed in exasperation. Jaime seized her hand, lacing his fingers through hers. “Come on...let's walk.” Brienne understood, it would give them some time.

With familiarity she began to navigate the rocky seaside pass which lead up to her childhood stomping grounds. Stairs were sporadically carved into the stone, easing the journey up the steadily rising incline. They could have taken the longer way around, utilising the horses alongside the guards but then
they would have been unable to talk.
She marvelled at how Jaime knew this....he has made Tarth his home.
The thought thrilled her more than she could say.

She inhaled a large lungful of salt air, hastily reminding herself of the real reason behind her visit.
“My father...?”
When his tone was gentle, she knew the answer wasn't all positive. “He is ailing – though we may
have stretched the severity of it. We wanted to get you here.”
“We?” She stopped in her tracks and grinned at the absurdity of it.
“Yes, Ser Brienne. We. Your father and I have come to an understanding.”

They stood together on a graveled ledge, the vista of the Straits of Tarth reaching endlessly behind
them.
Jaime openly stared at her, disbelief and euphoria radiating from him.
Their stance reminded her of that first fateful night....when they had crossed the irreversible divide
from allies into lovers.
The same intensity in their gaze as they studied each other.
She was sure she beamed. Brienne knew shock still reverberated in her system and when this
adrenaline dropped she would be greatly fatigued. But she was happy to ride the high whilst it
lasted.

“Look at you.”
She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “What about me?”
“Kingsguard. All glory and righteousness. Lady Commander.” He smirked. “I'll wager you do a far
better job than I ever did.”
“Don't be so sure about that. I do exactly what you described. I stand and I guard. I attend council
meetings that drag on endlessly and achieve little. You.....you tried to save a city.” The respect she
felt for him was immense.
“Tried being the operative word.”
“That's not your fault.”
He tilted his head to one side, another Jaime signature. “How did you know I rang the bells?”
“Tyrion told me the plan.”
“But you didn't know I achieved it.”
“I have faith you in. You're a man of honour.”
He looked at the ground. “The only honourable thing I can lay claim to, is keeping you around
long enough to become everything
I should have been.”
“Jaime, that's not true.”
“You know - when I saw you in that boat the only thing I could think about was how perfectly
unspoiled you looked.
Pure, not one skerrick of tarnish. You are impeccable. I feel like I'm going to taint you. You
deserve so much.....”
She cut him off mid thought. “I got the only thing I wanted when I heard you calling to me.”

There it was - honesty.
After all her girlhood dreams of knightly valour and living her life by her sword. When they came
to fruition, they were empty by comparison.
And what could deplete her ambitions to insignificance? Jaime's love.
His word's and the way he said them. The smouldering look in his eyes she never thought would be
directed at her.
She only now appreciated it had been there a while, buried deep beneath the japes and
cocksuredness that was Jaime's facade.
*We are here – together and sincere, open and unrestrained, mutually assured of each other's love –*
Jaime meandered close. “It's going to be difficult to be alone once we get there. Best grasp any chance we can.”

His mouth melted into hers before she could reply. Brienne wrapped her arms around him, running her fingers through his silver streaked hair, massaging the back of his head lovingly. He nipped at her bottom lip before showering kisses down her neck, nuzzling affectionately at the small amount of flesh he could access. She pressed her lips to his temple, then frowned. From her vantage point she noticed a foreign line, extending across his cheek, it hadn't been there before. She traced it with her finger. “This scar is new.”

Jaime lifted his head. “You noticed.”

“You noticed.”

“Of course I noticed. How did you.....?”

“Later wench.” He resumed kissing then paused. “It doesn't make me less handsome does it?”

She laughed unreservedly and shook her head in bewilderment. *Some things never change.*

“I think we best go and see my Father, before everything catches up with me.”

* * *

The Evenstar sat up straight and tall in his bed. All the better to look less frail. He had wanted to leave this stifling room to greet her but the Maester advised against it. Then again, if his suspiscions were accurate, perhaps Duncan would want privacy to greet his daughter. *Though not too much...*

He could hear footfalls in his quarters. The telltale clink of metallic armour. Duncan shouldered open the chamber door to usher in Brienne, favouring Selwyn with the most genuine smile he had seen from the man to date.

The Evenstar's sole surviving child was a noble vision. A living piece of Westerosi history. Taller than both men and resplendent in the armour of the Kingsguard. An air of happiness exuded from her despite the concern for his wellbeing writ upon her expression.

Selwyn glanced down, noting that they're hands were clasped. The fingers of Duncan's sole hand woven tightly with hers.

He couldn't help but be smug at his accurate deduction. *That is not how friends behave.*

“Father.” She broke the contact to approach the bed and embrace him. Her armour making the entire process difficult.

“As I live and breathe. My own daughter in the garb of the Kingsguard.”

She sighed. He sensed she did not relish the role as much as she had pretended. “We have seen many things change. The world is one our selves of Summer would never believe.”

“I'll second that notion.” Duncan hovered at the doorway unsure where he was welcome or intruding.

Brienne studied her father intently as she perched on the side of the bed, a sole line of worry indenting between her brows.

“How is your health?”

He brushed off the enquiry. “I age. That is all. They fuss too much.”

She squinted at him, doubtful of his claims.

Duncan chuckled from behind.

“See what I have been dealing with? He is twice as stubborn as you, though not nearly as appealing.” His smile was wolfish.

The Evenstar bristled but not due to the jab. *Is he daring to flirt with my daughter? Right in front of*
Her armour rustled against the sheets as she turned to glower at Duncan.
“What? I am only speaking the truth. Like you taught me.”
Selwyn wished he could witness her full reaction from his position.

Facing back towards him, she grimaced apologetically.
“Thank you, wholeheartedly Father, for harbouring him.” A glance sideways. “I know too well what a trial he can be.”
Ser Bluestone had the temerity to look offended. “Am I to be outnumbered?” The knight was irrepressible.
“I wish I could say it has been easy.” The Evenstar replied. An ironic snort sounded from her throat.
Her actions would indicate distaste but her countenance implies attachment.....I will have to observe them further.

“I have had enough of these four walls and this room.” He declared. “Let us three share dinner tonight.
You must be famished after your journey.”
“Truthfully a meal is not my foremost need.” Her shoulders slumped. Upon closer inspection she appeared wan, fatigued.
“I have had your chambers prepared. Go – bathe, change and rest.”
“Thank you again Father.” She kissed his cheek, hesitating before adding. “I am sorry, for our disagreement and my terse words.”
“We were both to blame.” He admitted. “I only now realise how misinformed I was. You were right about many things....Now let's not waste another thought on it. You are here. It is a time for celebrations.”
“That is something I agree with.” Duncan chimed in.
Selwyn eyed him suspiciously. “Do you require an escort to your chambers? I can call one of the ladies -”
She politely declined. “I think I can remember where it is.”
“Very well, run along. Duncan will stay here. I need to instruct him in what to tell the staff for our dinner preparations.”
“Aren't I a little overqualified for that?” Ser Bluestone did not seem too keen on the suggestion and the Lord suspected the real reason why.
“As Castellan you do as I tell you.”
Brienne rose from the bed. “I am too tired to mediate. I will take my leave.”
Her gaze lingered upon Duncan a little too long as she made her departure. He wistfully watched her go before narrowing his eyes at Selwyn.
The Evenstar smiled, folding his arms across his chest.
“My castle. My rules.”
Symbiotic

Chapter Summary

A celebratory dinner in Evenfall Hall... 

Chapter Notes

For these next couple of chapters let us bask in the beautiful fluffiness that is our beloved couple.
We've earned it after all we went through on their journey back to each other!

I'm still ticking off goals and I hope you are enjoying this with me.
To finally have them happy together is uplifting to write.

“Brienne....” His husky voice roused her from slumber. Sleep befuddlement taking a moment to clear. Jaime....
She felt a soft kiss placed upon her forehead as she blinked her eyes open.
“Come on wench! I'm risking my other hand – or more important appendages.” Jaime chuckled, his face mere inches from hers.
He had knelt upon the floor beside the bed, to be at her level. Resting his chin upon the furs.
She brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes, murmuring to him. “You're actually here.”

“I feel the same way - I'm supposed to be in my chambers changing before supper, but I had to steal away and wake you myself.”
“I'm glad you did.” She was enjoying just staring at him. Fixing every frame in her memory. All too aware that each second was precious.
“I have little regard for rules.” Jaime professed. "But I don't need to tell you that.”
Brienne gently outlined the scar on his cheek, confused as to his meaning. He caught her hand in his own and kissed her palm.
“Lord Selwyn suddenly has me on a very short leash. Strange that – another Tarth family trait....remember when you did that to me?”
“Yes – I should never have let you off it.”
“Don't think you did.” He laughed. “With the right persuasion I just might let you try it out again.”
As he leant over her, Brienne drew him in for a vigourous kiss, gliding her hands up his back and knotting them in his hair.
After a beat, Jaime hesitantly withdrew. “Now I know why your Father thought this was dangerous....keep kissing me like that and I may very well be deported. Though, it would be worth it.”
“Can't you come up here?” She patted the furs beside her, she wanted to be close to him. “Lie with me for a while.”
“I can't, we are late for dinner. And you, Wench - well earning the title - are encouraging me to play with fire.”
Pre-empting her next move he hastily sprung to his feet, whilst she lunged to pull him over. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips as she challenged him. “I thought you lived life taking risks?”

“Sparring with me already? You are trying to get me killed. After that thrashing earlier why am I not surprised?”

She was indignant. “It was barely a push! Have you become soft?”

His eyes gleamed wickedly. “That is not a phrase you want to ask me when you lay in bed, or else I just may prove otherwise.”

“You're all talk Kingslayer.”

* * *

How I've missed this – his wit, his suggestive inappropriate charm. Though I would never tell him so, it would only serve to encourage him.

In just a few short bursts of his company she already found him deliciously annoying, trying to tease her with his fancy words and empty threats. Was he really going to allow himself to be allayed by her Father? Didn't he wage a war of want as she did? Now rested, her blood was singing.

“And what would you rather I do?” Jaime enquired.

“I am a woman of action. I would hope my chosen mate was the same.”

“Very well My Lady.” His smirk was fiendish, stalking her room like a cat with prey in its sights.

“Until dinner....”

With that phrase he left.

Oh shit....

* * *

She strolled into the dining hall, following the inviting scents of a warm meal. What greeted her was a sumptuous spread – far more than three people would ever require. Jaime stood speaking with her Father who had already been seated at the head of table. Always a stickler for propriety he struggled to rise when she entered.

“Father – sit. There is no need.”

“I will not let my good breeding fall to the wayside, how much further would you have me succumb?”

“Honestly.” Brienne huffed at him as she helped him back into his seat, he waved off her assistance with a dismissive hand.

“Welcome to my world Lady Tarth.” Jaime smirked at her from the opposite side of her Father's chair.

“I do believe it is actually mine Ser,” she corrected. “And it is I who should be welcoming you.”

“No – I've been here longer.”

“Longer than my entire childhood? I think not.”

“I arrived first.”

“Technically I did.”

“But you left, I stayed and took up residency. Thereby I get to welcome you.”

“I have the prior claim!”

Selwyn turned his head looking from one to another, puzzlement wrinkling his brow.

“Goodness! I could get a crick in my neck. Is this a common occurrence?”

Simultaneously Brienne said 'yes' as Jaime answered 'no.'

He became even more perplexed. “I thought the two of you got along?”

“Fear not Lord Selwyn.” Jaime swaggered over to stand behind one of the empty chairs. “We are compatible in the most important of ways.”
Brienne's eyes widened as his inference screamed volumes.
The Evenstar's response was prickly. “What is that supposed to mean?”
Jaime made no attempt to hide his glee as he waited for her to answer.

*Think fast.*

“What is that supposed to mean?”
Jaime made no attempt to hide his glee as he waited for her to answer.

“Fighting Father. Side by side. Place a sword in both our hands and no adversary can stand against
us.” She glared at her man across the table.
The former lion pulled out her chair, presenting it with a grandiose sweep. “My Lady...”

Deep breaths..... She rounded the table behind her father to claim her seat.
“Speaking of side by side.” Jaime collected the other chair and began to move around to her side of
the table.
“What are you doing?” The elderly Lord demanded. “That is not according to a traditional seating
plan! I sit at the head of the table and you are to be on the ends, either side of me.”
Jaime dropped the chair to the right of hers. “I don't give two sniffs for your seating plan. I have
waited months to see your daughter and I'm not going to have a plank of wood dividing us.”
She beamed at the sentiment but could see it unnerved her Father.

*I will try to placate Jaime first....*

“Codes of conduct are very important here.” The Lady Knight explained gently. “We sat opposite
each other at the Winterfell banquet....”
Brienne knew full well he would remember how that night had ended.
“Different situation – besides he can hardly object. It's not likely I am going to do anything
untoward, I only have one hand.” Jaime plonked himself down defiantly.

Lord Selwyn was shaking his head. “I don't know, this doesn't seem right....”
Brienne turned beseechingly to her Father. “It is alright....we....” She swallowed, revealing her
innermost feelings was difficult.

“.....We have missed each other.”

The Evenstar quietened at his daughter's confession. She nodded in encouragement.
Finally his shoulders slumped in surrender and he signalled the wait staff.
Brienne felt strangely content, regardless of the miscommunications.
She was flanked by both men she loved. It was a blessing. There was beauty to be had in this.
Their little squabbles would always pass. She could feel love in this room.

* * *

*What a peculiar pair they make.*

Selwyn devoted much of his attentions on deciphering the interactions in front of him.
Now that he had both parties within his sights he was resolved to reach a conclusion about their
relationship.
Earlier he could have sworn they were fundamentally incompatible but now - after his daughter's
rude and brusque declaration coupled with Ser Duncan's immovable obstinancy to seat himself by her side - it
would seem there was more to this partnership than first met the eye.

Brienne sat demurely as the servers attended them.
She covered her goblet with her hand, refusing the offer of wine.
Without speaking, the man beside her slid his hand over hers, lifting it off without receiving so
much as a protestation.

*A very familiar and presumptive gesture.*
Quickly assessing the contents of the flagon he asserted, “She likes Dornish Red.”

“Right away Ser.”
A flush crept over Brienne's cheeks, making a Father wonder what thoughts crossed her mind.
Their trenchers were laden with food. Both selecting the same fare. 
_Warriors often have similar appetites, Selwyn mused._
The Dornish Red was produced and she did not decline again when they filled her cup. 
_He knows her tastes, they have drunk together before._
This surprised him. His daughter had always been partial to sobriety.

Ser Duncan chatted congenially, filling the vacant air whilst Brienne listened intently. 
In a tone reeking of the highest snobbery, the man relayed how in his travels, he had been left with no choice but to make an honest living. 
She responded to him with sardonic humour, as she precisely sliced her steak into even portions. 
“Now there is something I cannot picture.”
“I know, I felt the same - you will never guess what I ended up doing....”
Discreetly, Brienne lifted their plates, swapping their places without ceremony. 
_He only has one hand, he lost it defending her virtue...._
The gesture was so touching and natural to them. They didn't even feel the need to address it. 
The Knight refilled both their goblets from the flagon, hers first as a gentlemen should, raising it in Selwyn's direction in askeance.
“No, I still have mine – thank you.” He wished to keep his wits about him. 

_A short time later the wine was affecting them both._
_Ser Duncan was becoming increasingly more zealous with his storytelling and Brienne was dissolving into fits of laughter. The Evenstar had never seen her so uninhibited. Her broad smile was intoxicating in itself as she absolutely beamed. Her complete focus was centred entirely on the man next to her._

“You didn't!” She reached over with her fork, piercing a small potato which the Knight had been chasing around the plate. With it finally held in place he was able to slice it in half. 
_This is their routine. He realised. They have it down to an art form._
“How can you ask me that? You know I say whatever comes into my mind...and at that particular moment what I was tasting called back memories of horse piss!” Duncan chortled along with her, before offering Selwyn an explanation. “When the outlaws captured us, they denied me water and when they finally supplied something....well.” He shrugged. 
“That was not a fine moment, we shouldn't be laughing.” She leant on her elbows on the table, years of being surrounded by soldiers clearly eliminating her lessons in etiquette. 
But she was in her element. Her effortless flow a welcome sight after watching her spend her adolescence wishing for obscurity. 
“What else can we do Wench?” _WHAT did he just call her?! “It is very much in the past now, least we can do is make light in the wake of it.”_ 
He bent his head towards hers, so their foreheads were almost touching. Selwyn suspected a romantic gesture was imminent had they not thought better of it, catching themselves in the act. 
_They are couple, there can be no mistaking it but still...._
“What title, pray tell, did you just refer to my daughter by?”
“It's a term of endearment Lord Selwyn, I meant no offence.”
“Just a nickname Father, it is said in jest. He doesn't mean it.”
“It does not sound very complimentary to my ears.” The Evenstar was stern. 

“The origins of it go way back.” Brienne soothed. “I was of course not very happy with it in the beginning but now that I know him and understand - it doesn't bother me as much. It is said ironically anyway, it's meaning was always the reverse.”
“Because she was the farthest thing from it.” Ser Duncan cleared his throat. “Is.” He drained his wine cup. 
Lord Selwyn thought it may be wise if he drank his own. 
“Will you not quit while you're not ahead?” She asked the Knight through gritted teeth.
“I would if I could but it just keeps getting worse.” His shoulders shook with barely contained mirth. “Next I am like to tell him about our bath together at Harrenhal.”

“Jaime!”

Selwyn nearly choked on his wine, erupting into a coughing fit at the piece of information his daughter had just unwittingly disclosed.

There was only one man he knew of in the Seven Kingdoms who bore that name....

* * *

Brienne knew she had blundered by her Father's reaction.
Jaime's wry grin and raised eyebrows confirmed it.
“Did he not know?” She kept her voice low.
“He does now.”

The Evenstar cleared his throat, regaining his composure. “Your real name – is Jaime.”

Brienne looked at her lion. His charisma, notorious confidence and glorious good looks. It was quite evident to her which family he belonged to. She was surprised Jaime had managed to keep it a secret for all this time.

“Yes Lord Selwyn.”
“And your family name – is Lannister.” The disfavour was palpable as he spat the last name.
Jaime sighed. She felt for him, he didn't deserve to face this again.

“Father -”
“No, Brienne. I want to hear him say it.”

Jaime gripped her arm to quiet her. “Lannister. Jaime Lannister. Lion of Lannister, Ser Jaime of the Kingsguard, Former Lord Commander, Kingslayer, Shit for Honour, Sisterfucker, Oathbreaker – I’ve heard them all and answered to them. Does this confession please you?”

“All this time you were under my roof....”

Brienne would not sit silently and hear this. “It makes no difference!”
Both men snapped their attention to her, a severity in her voice that brooked no argument.

“He is a man of honour. The same man who has been in this castle, helping you. The same Lord who saved me several times over, who Knighted me. The people that gave him those names – didn't know him. We do. Think wisely Father – before you say another phrase and diminish all you've built with us.”

Us. Jaime and I are coupled.
She felt his pain. When her Father judged him, it bled inside her chest.
She wouldn't take it. She refused to accept it.
Jaime looked to her and then back to her father.
“I have been many things. Be they terrible, be they full of shame. I wear it. I do not run from it. It is only necessity that drives me into hiding. To protect the woman who would defend me, with her noble heart. I love her....that's never going to stop, or change or cease. She is the only good and meaningful thing I have found in my wretched existence. So tell me Selwyn – now you know who I am – are we to be enemies? Will you seek to become yet another force intent on prying us apart because of a past I cannot alter?”

Brienne feared her Father's reaction, all to aware that they had just reached a pinnacle.
She had shown her loyalty, aligned unshakably with Jaime. It is up to him now....

“So it seems I find myself defeated.” The Lord of Evenfall Hall dropped his fork onto his plate with a clatter.

“All night I have observed the two of you trying to comprehend this strange simpatico. But now I know – it is indeed love. Look how you rally! The defence of each other is awe-inspiring. My
opinions on your family and your past conduct – Jaime...” The Evenstar put emphasis on his real name. “.....are of little significance. Though never would I have imagined my only child would end up enamoured with the Kingslayer, of all people.....yet, what I really want, is for Brienne to be loved. To be happy. She struggled so to find her feet in this world. I erred as a Father, I know that. But you, managed to bring out this life in her and are the reason for the joy I have witnessed this evening. Then I am – you will be pleased to know this Brienne – wise enough to accept that even if I wanted to balk, I would be foolish, for five armies of men would not tear the two of you apart.” Brienne exhaled, she didn't even realise she had been holding her breath. Jaime smiled at her, raising her hand to his lips to kiss her knuckles. Her father seemed keen to move the conversation on, though he did have a condition he felt compelled to state. “However - I do expect certain moral standards to be abided by.” He glared at her then Jaime in turn, fixing them with a steely gaze. “Now, that is out of the way....shall I send for dessert?”
Tryst

Chapter Summary

And later that night....

Chapter Notes

Family dinner – Check
Jaime's Identity Revealed – Check
Hmmmm, what comes next I wonder? :D

Brienne's heart hammered against her ribcage as they parted in the hall.
The flickering flames from the sconces throwing long shadows across the tapestries and carpet as the trio said their goodnights.
Her father had wedged himself firmly between them, determined to despatch them to opposite ends of the stronghold.
*Will Jaime come to me?*

The wine seemed to amplify sensation, pounding in her veins an erratic rhythm, she could count every pulsation.
A crippling inability to convey her adoration had tormented her throughout their meal.
The affliction of shyness in the presence of her father had made her understand Jaime's own hesitations earlier.
She did not want to be disrespectful to his wishes, but he seemed to have forgotten a lover's plight.

*Did he feel the same for mother all those years ago? Or was theirs a marriage of political convenience?*
Her Mother had passed away when Brienne was young and she had no recollection of their relationship. Her Father entertained several woman during her youth. Most were kept at a distance from her and she was never the kind to pry. She suspected they were only dalliances.
The fact that her Father never remarried despite numerous paramours should have made him less rigid.
But she was a woman and an heir – which apparently invoked a double standard and made the circumstances different.

“Goodnight Father....Ser Jaime.” She tried not to look as stiff and awkward as she felt.
*If only he would relent.*
Jaime seemed to remain ambivalent towards the whole situation. Or at least as far as she could tell.
“Lady Brienne, Lord Selwyn....I bid you a good evening. We certainly won't be wanting breakfast.”
“No.” She smiled at him, almost coyly. She was never convinced she could successfully pull off such a feminine trait.
*Be the irreverent rogue I know you are....*
Lord Selwyn was quick to shepherd them. “Well goodnight then. To your chambers. Go on -” He
gestured in their respective directions refusing to budge an inch. 

“Shall I see you back to your quarters Father?” Brienne was worried he was overdoing it. Towards the end of their meal she could see the weariness engulfing him - but he was stubborn and refused to retire until he had outlasted the two conspiring warriors. 

“No. That is what my manservant is for. Now be gone.” 

“Goodnight again.” Kissing his cheek, she pivoted reluctantly on her heel. Mentally restraining herself to prevent glancing back. She heard receding footsteps in the opposite direction and knew Jaime had taken the hint himself. 

Slowly she traversed the halls. Stopping to take in her surroundings. She had rested earlier and was wide awake. The idea of sleeping alone again when Jaime was close by devastated her. He was so near now - only this morning her world was bleak. 

But he is alive.....

She took a moment of solitude to collect her own thoughts, not having had the opportunity since her arrival and the many shocks thereafter. 

Jaime is alive. What will we do? What does this mean for us? Every option sang with promise. The future euphorically flipped.

Arms wrapped around her from behind, his prickly beard teasing her neck as it was coated in enthusiastic kisses. 

“How did you find me so quickly?” 

“I have been in this castle a while, you learn a trick or two.” 

She reached behind and drew his mouth to hers. “We best go to my chambers. It is uncouth to be this way....where anyone could observe us.” 

“You're not going to have to ask me twice.” 

“Hmmm. Shows your resolve.” She couldn't help but taunt him. 

“What is that supposed to mean?” He rubbed his nose against her temple. 

“Let me remember what you said earlier....” As she spoke Jaime’s left hand crept up her front, pulling at the laces of her jerkin. “Unspoiled, pure – worried that you'll taint me?” 

Jaime stepped in front of her, squinting as he pretended not to recall. “Doesn't ring a bell. It also doesn't particularly sound like something I'd say....far too honourable.” He bent down to use his teeth to work the knot loose. 

When he did it to himself, it was quite ridiculous but when he tries it on me.... 

“Jaime – come along.” She walked so he would have no choice but to follow. 

Her room was warm, a subtle fire had been prelit by the staff. The air did not carry the same crisp chill since spring had broken but a cool breeze often blustered in from the water. 

She locked her chamber door from the inside, sealing the pair of them off from the outside world. 

In these cozy confines, his was the only company she wished to keep. 

“Why do you always get the good rooms?” Jaime was already making himself comfortable. Removing his boots and outer layers. She began to do the same. “What do you mean?” 

“In Winterfell your chamber was easily twice the size of mine.” 

“That's easy, they liked me. Yours would have been a prison cell if they'd had their way.” 

“Glad you're finally admitting it.” 

A million morbid details from the last year of her life flitted through her mind. She shoved them out of the way. Not tonight.

Jaime noticed her shift in demeanour. “Something you're not telling me?” 

“I strongly suspect there is an abundance of things we have yet to tell each other.” 

Jaime nodded, stretching out on her bed, like he owned the entire castle. “Just tell me none of them
contain the words 'Tormund Giantsbane.'"
"Are you serious? No!" She barely masked her annoyance.
"Good. Then they can wait."

Brienne climbed onto the bed kneeling next to him and studying his face, her irritation palpable. *How could he ask me that?* She wasn't asking him if any of his misadventures featured Cersei. Because she knew they did....

As if reading her thoughts, Jaime pushed himself up on his forearms until they were nearly nose to nose. “There hasn't been anyone else for me either...though I did consider working in a pleasure house.”

“Piss off.” She pushed him back onto the mattress and he laughed. Extending out his arm, he gestured for her to lie down.

She rested her head on the pillow beside him as he rolled to face her, wrapping her tightly in his arms. This is what she had wanted earlier.

“Only good things Wench.”

“In what regard?”

“We have countless experiences to discuss from our time apart – I'm safely guessing both good and bad. So let's tackle them nightly. One topic each. That way it's not too much to deal with.”

“Sounds fair.”

“But for tonight, we are happy and deserve to be, so.... only good things.” He pecked her lightly on the lips. “I'm waiting.”

Sifting through the recesses of her memory she earnestly struggled to locate a pleasant event. Jaime attentively showered her from chin to ear in kisses. “Well?”

“You are distracting me.” She pulled him to her and claimed his mouth. She wanted proper passion and to forget talk. Jaime groaned before dragging himself away. “Patience, Ser Brienne. I want my fact.”

*Why is he toying with me?* She huffed and blurted out the first thing that popped into her mind.

“I knighted Podrick.”

“Really?” He seemed incredulous. “Ser Payne.” The way he said it dragged out the last name to insinuate the words original meaning.

“That's not funny.”

“It is a little if you think about it.”

“Pod well and truly earnt it.”

He held up his hands in mock surrender. “Don't get me wrong, I like the boy, I'm pleased for him.”

“Who do you think is looking after the Kingsguard while I'm here?”

Jaime's eyebrows nearly met his hairline. “A white cloak as well? It makes sense. He's a loyal lad.”

A sudden mischievous grin overtook Jaime's face. “I told you the pair of you would get along. Turns out you very much like my surprises.....I saw Oathkeeper on your hip but where is your armour?”

“In my chambers in the White Sword Tower. I have to wear the Gold now but it was not an easy transition I can assure you.”

“Still – I make informed decisions when it comes to what you'll like.” He kissed her once, a simmering look in his eyes.

She was very unsure where he was headed with this line of conversation.

Jaime sat up, his long muscular legs straight out in front of him and patted his thighs. “Come here.”

“Why?”

“If you don't, you won't find out.”

Intrigued, she knelt over his lap, resting one leg to either side of his and sitting back on her haunches. “I'm glad we're still clothed.”

“More's the pity - and no you're not. You've been trying to seduce me all evening.”
“I have done no such thing!”
“Brienne there is no use trying to beguile a Lannister. We practically invented it.”
She could only smile at him. The warmth she felt in his company flowing through her entire being.
“What is this all about?”

Leaning forward, he softly caressed her lips with his, deepening the kiss to tease her with his tongue.
With a husky voice he answered. “A surprise. This is what I wish to share with you from my journey.”
Maintaining eye contact, Jaime slid his hand into the pocket of his breeches.
He produced a small item, which he presented in front of her, holding it between two fingers.
It took her a moment to focus on it. A gold setting housed a cobalt blue gem, Jaime shifted it slightly and a starburst of light quickly flashed across the surface. It was a ring.
She regarded him questioningly.

Jaime took a deep breath. “Now, I know you're not traditionally a jewellery woman but bear in mind I already gave you a very nice sword. Not only does this ring remind me of those astonishing eyes of yours and therefore you but....if you choose to accept, it also comes with an extra.”
“And what is that?” She liked it. She had never opted to own or wear any adornment of the sort. But the fact that he had chosen it thinking of her when they were miles apart, was enough to overwhelm her with emotion.
“Me. Forever. If you'll have me.” Her gaze travelled from the ring to his eyes. They were sincere.
“Ser Brienne of Tarth, former Maid, My Lady, My Wench – will you marry me?”

Her hand flew to her face, she had not seen that coming.
Brienne's watery blue eyes studied his expression waiting for the jest, the laughter.
But no – he too was waiting, for her response.
“Jaime...”
“Too soon?”
“No!”
He angled his head. “Is that no?”
“No! I mean yes...or no that isn't a no.” She was flustered. “Jaime do you really want this?”
She leant her forehead on his shoulder and took calm steadying breaths. Marriage contracts had never ended well for her.

“Completely. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”
She raised her head and looked at her man, finding her voice. “I have never loved or felt about anyone the way I do about you. Of course I want to say yes, my heart wants it so much.”
“And what does that stubborn Tarth head of yours say?” He kissed her brow.
“I have to be released from my vows, I'm sworn to chastity, you have to ask my father - you have to defeat me in combat.”
“What?” Despite everything he chuckled.
“Years ago I declared that any man who sought to claim my hand had to challenge me for it. I broke a betrothal that way.”
“Well I accept the challenge. However misguided that may be.”
“You do?” This was insane.
“I do. And tomorrow if you wish I will ask for your Father's blessing.”
“You're going to do all that – just to marry me?”
“Those aren't obstacles Brienne. Not after what we've faced. I love you.”

Why did I ever bring all those silly conditions up?
She grabbed his face in both her hands and ardenly pressed her lips to his.
“Yes.”
“Did you just say what I think you said?”
“It's only preliminary -” The Lady Knight shone. “But yes.”
They snatched kisses as they beamed at each other.
“Well, if it's only temporary then you don't get the ring yet.” He moved it behind his back.
“Jaime-” She grabbed for it. “I want to wear it.”
“It's not official yet Wench.”
“Let me wear it tonight...it may be the only thing I have on.” I can be suggestive too.
He looked her up and down, just as he had that memorable night in her chambers long ago. "What about your Father?"
"Perhaps he would view it differently if he knew we were betrothed."
“And your vow of chastity?"
“Fuck vows.” As their mouths joined hungrily he slipped the ring on her finger.

*S * *

Sweat soaked and heated the lion reclaimed his mate.
Sinking her deep into the furs swathed by dwindling firelight.
Need and want eclipsing any remaining notions of obedience and restraint.
Her hands were polarisingly both strong and tender as they explored his skin. Her left she repeatedly pressed to his right cheek, a woman's instinct drawing her to his scar – the marker of the wound that very near tore them apart.
Whenever she did, he felt the cold metal band of the ring she now wore.
The one he had toiled to place upon her finger – for all the world to see.
She was his. Let no man put asunder.
“Jaime...” In ecstasy she called his name, adding to the chorus of sighs and cries a new phrase to their repertoire. “...I love you.”
The sound of it was nearly his undoing. There will never be enough to this. Of her.
Their all-consuming unequivocal blaze.
He kissed her collarbone, running his hand along the soft flesh of her thigh as she pressed it against his. Luxuriating in the way her taut body rippled and writhed beneath him.
“Brienne....” It was her name on his lips as he groaned in pleasure.
One day, he thought. I will call you by another name.
I will call you wife.

*S * *

“Jaime-” There was something she had to say before sleep claimed them.
They'd made love twice and now they were spent. Held close in each other's arms as her eyelids drooped. “-thank you for keeping your promises. For coming back to me. You are a good man.”
“Of course I did, I can't live without my heart and it resides with you.”
Her eyes drifted shut, the contentment of this moment irresistible.

“Are you tired Brienne?”
“Hmmmmm? Yes, very.”
“Good....I don't think you should sleep.”
She struggled to reopen her eyes, baffled. “Why?”
“Because I have to battle you tomorrow. So I need my rest but you should be overtired.”
She settled back into the pillow with a smile on her face. “Nice try.”
“We overslept didn’t we?” His voice carried across her chambers. Brienne peered at the handsome Knight, lolling casually in her bed. *A pleasant sight I could get used to....*

She was already outfitted in a set of leathers, it felt like an age since she had been permitted to dress in a more casual manner. She had nearly forgotten how natural they felt. Like a second skin. The Lady of Tarth pulled back the heavy curtains covering the doorway to her balcony. Dazzling light spilled across the room, bouncing off the cerulean hues of the ocean in the distance.

“I would say mid-morning. If not later.” “We did keep each other up rather late last night...and lying in this morning.” Jaime raised his eyebrows, watching her as she brushed her hair smooth. She could see his every facial expression reflected in her looking glass. How she had despised that thing growing up. Each day it spoke a bitter truth, she never liked what it beheld. Praying to the Maiden to wake up changed, a normal pretty girl, only to have the mirror shatter her fragile hopes in the morning light. Transported to a different mindset by time and fate, today it was simply a humourous tool for observing her lover. *He is about to say something suggestive.....*

“You know – your hair gets delightfully fluffed up when we've had a roll in the bed. Kind of a giveaway really.” She had tamed down her locks to their usual restrained style. It was another more obvious hallmark that bothered her. “That can be rectified. I have larger tells to be concerned with.” To her eyes her cheeks were noticeably flushed, still burning with her afterglow. The embarrassment of potential discovery only serving to make them brighter. In the North, chaffing winds often turned complexions red with cold so it was simple to disguise. In Tarth that was not the case.

“That’s for you to worry about Wench...I have to get out of here.” He slipped from the sheets and Brienne tried not to stare at his firm body.
He has always been unabashed. Ever since he wandered into my bath at Harrenhal, naked as his name day.
“Same clothes and a lengthy jaunt across a bustling castle.” He muttered to himself as he dressed. “Today I face impossible odds in all areas.” “Too challenging for you Ser Jaime? You can always concede.” Remembering her own task for the day she stood straighter, eyeing him as she would a rival. “That is one satisfaction I intend to deny you My Lady.” He moved in front of her as she helped him fasten the buckles on his jerkin.

Placing a swift kiss upon her lips in thanks, Jaime lifted her her left hand. “I will be taking this, as collateral.” He removed the Sapphire from her finger and she unwittingly pouted. The extraction of it somehow saddened her. Depositing it securely in his pocket, he read the disappointment on her features. “Incentive.” Another kiss. “Until later Ser Brienne, I have a prior obligation.”

The lion strode to her door, turning the key in the lock. “Midday.” She commanded. “At the square. Bring your sword.” “Unfortunately I cannot....your Father wouldn't give me one.” The Lady Knight rolled her eyes at him. “But I accept your challenge – high noon it is.” He whisked it open, checking the hall before making a dash for it.

* * *

“May I enquire as to the whereabouts of Lord Selwyn?” Jaime had assumed the older man would still be bedridden but had found the chambers empty and being cleaned by a handful of staff. His manservant nodded. “He insisted that today he would not be treated as an invalid Ser. You will find him in his solar.”
There seemed a touch of timidity about the attendant. Jaime wondered why.

Walking the short distance to the Evenstar's favoured solar, he checked his appearance one last time.

A Lord must be presentable when he approaches his Lady's Father.

He had freshened and changed, eager to eliminate any telltale signs of the previous evenings flagrant disregard for decorum. Jaime recalled how he himself had bristled when Trystane had been overtly tactile with Myrcella. A natural reaction which could not be quashed even with a lifetime of referring to himself as Uncle. It is no wonder he changed tune with me. But for today's conversation at least, he very much needed the gent's cooperation.

“Lord Selwyn,” Jaime greeted cheerily as he entered the sun bathed sitting room. “Glad to hear you are up and about. You must be feeling better.” The Evenstar had been staring out one of the high windows, he whirled on Jaime without pause. “You defied me!”

Fuck.

“I beg pardon My Lord?”
“Your chambers were not slept in last night. I sent servants to attend you.” Of course he did. The sneaky.... Jaime exhaled sharply. This was not going to according to plan. “I came here with purpose...can we not sit?”

“Do you intend avoiding the topic or are you buying time to contrive your lies Lannister?”
“I'm not going to lie to you.”
“Where were you last night?”
“Why ask a question to which you already know the answer?”
“You are glib.” Fury radiated off the older man as he shook his head. “Are these the tactics you use on Brienne as well?”

That hurt. “They are not tactics – I am just trying to deal with this in a rational and civilised manner. Something I thought you would appreciate.”
“What I would have appreciated was being given enough consideration and regard to have my wishes obeyed.”
“Lord Selwyn I do not want to fight with you. I came here on quite the opposite mission, perhaps it will ease your anger.”
“Precious little will appease me in this moment let me assure you.”

Jaime sat without invitation. I am going to have to do this anyway.
“The reason why I came, to speak with you, was because I wanted to ask you something. Out of respect.”
“Words are wind. Actions are the measure of ones true intentions.”
“It is my intentions which I wished to address,” He ensured his gaze was steady, his tone earnest.
“I am here to ask your permission for Brienne's hand in marriage.”

Selwyn scoffed at him. “You have a nerve. What insult is this?”
“Defile me?” He registered genuine surprise.
“Defile first, ask after. When you have already pressed your aim upon my Daughter.”
“There was no coercion!” Jaime was aggrieved at the implication. “We love each other – you saw that yourself last night.”
“If you loved her, you could have waited. Shown some restraint.”
“Is this judgment stemming from knowing who I truly am or would you have felt the same way prior?”
“Morals are morals. She is my heir and a highborn Lady. Such despoiling outside of wedlock is contemptible and she will not be escaping my wrath either. Brienne should know better.”

The Evenstar reached for the bell he used to summon his staff.
“What are you doing?”
“I am having her brought here. She will answer to this insubordination as well.”
Jaime lunged, snatching the bell before it could be rung. “Don't you dare humiliate her like that! We will discuss this – man to man.”
“Your are impudent!”
“And you are unreasonable! Now I can understand you're upset – I have been a Father too, I had a daughter once Selwyn. I acted much the same as you. But I have not gone to the effort of protecting her reputation with you for months so you can belittle Brienne due to a dose of wounded pride. Take your anger out at me.” Jaime took his seat, grasping the bell tightly in his left hand. “Let's start again.”

The Lord of Evenfall scowled at him. “Where were you last night?”
“With Brienne.”
The older man fumed. “Improper conduct.”
“My Lord...it was not....” Jaime tried to frame the phrase in a way that would not cause further damage. “Although I find your aspirations towards protecting Brienne's virtue...admirable. If you are under the misapprehension that last night was our first liaison – you would be mistaken.”
“She was not still a Maid?”
“No. Not for a while now. And if it had still been the case then yes, I would have shown due respect and waited. But that ship has sailed, so your interventions were superfluous.”
“It still does not make it right. Regardless of when the act took place.”
“We had been through too much Selwyn, to take heed of formalities like that. When you face certain death, you realise life's too short. We wanted to live, whilst we still could.”

The older man sighed. Jaime took his silence as a positive sign and ventured on.
“The only way, that this can be made right....is if you give me your blessing.”

“You are too smooth. It doesn't instill trust easily Jaime.”
“You believe that we love each other. Shouldn't that be all you need?”

The Evenstar was deep in contemplation.

Be patient...he is thinking. For once just keep your mouth shut.

“Are you sure she wants to marry you?” The old man seemed smug. “Because I haven't had much luck with her in the betrothal department.”

“Well...I am justifiably certain her heart has an invested interest in me. Though - that's not going to aid me much soon.”

“Howso?”

“She insists I fight her for the honour of her hand.”

Now Selwyn chuckled. “Why did you bother coming to converse with me? It is likely you will not be alive later this afternoon.”

“I can hold my own but as to the possibility of my actual victory - I fear that may be reliant on Brienne's own good graces.”

“I'll tell you what....if she capitulates, so to shall I.”

Jaime smirked. ‘I'm going to die a single man.”

“Does that thought bother you?”

“Yes.” The former lion decided to purge his soul. “I will be frank with you, as I hope to call you family. I have never had anyone I could call my own. My intimate history, shall we say, has been made very public. It was always wrong, frought with peril. I was an absolute dolt back then. In love I fell hard, but not wisely. My nature is not someone to jump from bed to bed. I have never visited brothels or kept the company of camp followers. I'm very faithful.”

“That is unusual for a man. I even have had my share of mistresses.”

“Well I don't. I devote. Blindly.” The next part was hard to admit. “My first relationship - and I'm sure you know of whom I speak - was misguided. Webs of lies and control I could not see. It broke me down. Made me the worst possible version of myself. I always had to deceive. I shared her with other men even when it killed me. A cycle of torture. Since the beginning with Brienne she knew the complete truth about me. It was refreshing. I never had to lie or cover up with her. She just heard, saw and accepted. If she judged that aspect of me she hid it well. I remember once telling her, quite prophetically 'we cannot choose, who we love.' Little did I realise, we in turn were already falling. Experiencing real love as I attached myself to Brienne, loosened Cersei's chains. I could feel my shackles slowly slipping away. With your daughter I am liberated. I have no desire to keep us private. I want to claim her. I want to tell the world she is mine. I long to call her wife and know that I have this exceptional woman in my life and no one can take her away from me.”

He knew Selwyn believed him. The Lord's foul mood had mitigated and instead Jaime beheld a supportive potential good-father.

“Pray to the Warrior Jaime. May the Seven guide your sword. They will have to intervene if I am ever to call you Son.”
She sat on a stone bench outside the armoury, smiling to herself as she unsheathed Oathkeeper. Polishing cloth in hand, she lovingly tended the blade. Preparing it for a bout against its original master. A second vastly inferior sword lay in its scabbard beside her on the bench, whet stone at the ready. Brienne knew to be fair she should prepare Jaime's steel for him in advance – even newly sharpened it would have little advantage over her own.

“Are you Ser Brienne?” A slight little girl had appeared in front of her as if from thin air. Brienne glanced across the square trying to locate her guardians to no avail.  “Yes. I am.” The girl beamed.  “I'm going to be a Knight like you one day.” “Is that right?” Where did this cheeky little thing come from? “Well good for you. It's not an easy road but we have what it takes. Just as much as the men.” “I told you it was her!” She hollered in a most unladylike fashion. The result was the scuffling sounds of numerous sets of tiny feet against the pavers. Before Brienne knew what was happening she was ambushed by a barrage of several more children. One boy stepped close his eyes as wide as saucers. “Oathkeeper! It's the Valyrian sword!” A few others drew nearer, answering his call with gasps of awe. “How did you know its name?” Brienne queried, raising a cautioning hand to keep them at bay. “Keep your distance, it is sharp.” “We know.” The girl assured her with a grin. “We know lots.” “I will let you see if you stand back.” The Lady Knight gestured for them to move. “Further.” I have to keep them safe. Finally satisfied by their distance, she tilted the blade so it glinted in the light. Its deep red and black lines rippling across the surface. Only now, did she notice the children were carrying sticks of various sizes. Brienne knew instantly their purpose. She had been guilty of the game herself until she had convinced her Father to allow her a tourney sword. She smiled at them as she sheathed Oathkeeper. They all looked at her expectantly. I believe the girl is their leader. This thought pleased her.

“What is your name?” “Nessa.” “And where is your Mother and Father?” Surely someone is meant to be watching them? “Mother's in there somewhere.” Nessa gestured to the castle. “My Father's one of the guards. His name's Andrew. Most of our parents work in Evenfall Hall. We come 'ere every day.” “Right.” Brienne understood now. “I know your Father.” This seemed to please the girl. As a matter of fact they all seemed incredibly excited to see her. “My Pa's Wesley.” One boy chimed in. “I'm the best sword fighter! I always win our melees.” Another boasted. “No you don't!” The first lad was shoved by the second who clearly disagreed. They began to tussle with each other. “Who's the other sword for?”
“What do Wights look like?”
“Can you stand up so we can see how tall you are?”
Questions flew from the left and right. Brienne wasn't sure what to do.

“Do you have bear scars?” The girl asked brazenly. “You know from where the bear scratched you? Raaarr!” Nessa acted out an impression of the creature.
The Lady Knight widened her eyes. Where is their knowledge coming from? “They are quite faded now....”
“Where are they? Can I see?”

A high pitched whistle split the air, grabbing all of their attention.
Jaime stolled up dressed in his leathers, a gigantic smile plastered across his face.
“Call off the hounds! Miss Spitfire, you are not supposed to ask to see a Lady's scars!”
“Ohhh, just a little one?”
“No.” He turned to the boys. “Wights are ugly, she will stand in a minute...” He pulled one boy off the other by the back of his shirt. “Neither of you are champions yet and I'm guessing....” Jaime looked at Brienne. “The other sword is for me?”
“Yes. Do you know these children?”
“Jackanapes is teaching us to fight.” Nessa volunteered. “And he tells us stories.”
Brienne couldn't help but be amused by the terminology. “Did you give yourself this title? It's well suited.”
“Children.” He shrugged.
“You could have warned me when I suggested the Square.”
“Not a chance! They are going to be my supporters. I need someone to cheer me on.”
The Lady Knight stood. “You mean to witness your defeat?”
All of their little heads shifted upwards as they took in her height.
A couple of mouths dropped open. Jaime looked to her hip. “You don't plan on using Oathkeeper against me?!”
“Whyyever not?”
Now it was his turn to look aghast. “It's my blade!”
“That is not what you said to me in the tent.”
“That's true.” One boy nodded, feeling the need to have an input.

“If I had Widow's Wail it would be a different story but - what am I using?!”
“Its over there.” Brienne pointed to the bench. The children had started to snigger.
“Garrison steel? I may as well use one of their sticks.”
“I meant to hone it for you but I-” She looked at the assembly of children. “Got distracted.”

“Are you going to battle?” Nessa asked.
Jaime alighted upon the bench, still frowning at the castle forged weapon.
“Yes we are and do you want to know why.” He beckoned them all over whilst she watched.
An unexpected sentiment sweeping through her at the sight of him with children.
I would have birthed our babe by now....
“Because I know how good you all are at keeping secrets.” Apparently from the giggles, that was an in-house joke to them.
“Lady Tarth has challenged me to a duel - for I have asked for her hand in marriage.”

Their response to this was ecstatic before reality set in, Nessa looked at Brienne then back to Jaime.
Patting him consolingly on the arm she said. “Sorry but you gonna lose.”
“Hey! Are you switching sides?”
“Come on lets get our spots – Jackanapes is gonna bite the bricks.”
The girl lead the way as the boys quickly followed suit.
“So much for your applauders.”
He chuckled, walking up to her. “Little traitors.”
“How did it go with my Father?”
“Don’t ask. We are fine now. He might be the only one actually on my side.” Jaime placed a chaste kiss on her lips.
“Not true – I’m cheering for you.” She stepped away before adding. “In spirit only of course.”
He took the bait. “That is perverse!”
“Not particularly, I made this rule before I met you.”
“Then why abide by it?”
“Because if I must give myself in marriage to a man-” Brienne wandered out into the square, drawing Oathkeeper. “Then at least may he be...’strong enough.’”
She hoped Jaime's memory was as sharp as hers, with the ability to recognise his own words from many years ago.

“I'm strong enough.” He did. “I had my right hand then but we are also minus tethers.”
Jaime followed her into the arena, brandishing his borrowed sword.
They both assumed fighting stance.
They hadn't crossed blades against each other since that fateful day on the bridge.

Both waited, poised for the onslaught as they circled their rival.
Neither pressed the attack.
Brienne could feel Jaime sizing her up. Looking for weakness.
*Perhaps I should try it...trigger him.*

She deliberately altered her stance, lowering Oathkeeper from prime position.
Instantaneously he came at her - as she knew he would. “You’re still predictable!” She goaded, easily parrying his blows as their steel sang. Their blades raking against each other with a familiar metallic ring. Providing the melody to their dance.
Brienne could hear voices. Adult onlookers were gathering.
*We are drawing attention.*

The distraction threw her move off a whisker.
Jaime hastily pressed the advantage but she could tell he was softening his blows. It took only seconds to recover her ground. She couldn't help but critique him. Revenge was a dish best served cold. “If you were willing to hurt me, you might have had me there.”

The Knight responded with a flurry of strikes, the clangour deafening as it reverberated off the surrounding buildings.
“You still move well.” He puffed.
“Am I still graceless?”
Jaime's trademark smirk was as audacious as ever. “I can think of areas where you are very graceful My Lady.”
He wasn't prepared for the backlash from that statement.
Brienne drove him tirelessly in reverse. Her blood rushing in her ears.
*This is living.*

“I don't believe we set the terms.” She darted Oathkeeper low to give him a smack on the thigh with the flat. “Are we point scoring?”
Her breathing was laboured but she was pacing herself.
The Lady Knight knew she still had energy stores to burn.
He attempted to tap her on the shoulder, but she feinted just in time.
“Disarm.” Jaime replied, his voice begging to strain. “That or death.”
“Very dramatic.” She chided him. He whirled changing course and she turned to keep him in her sights. It was odd duelling against someone left handed, everything seemed to be in reverse. Brienne's years of honing her craft paid off though, she still managed to accommodate seamlessly. “Not really.” Jaime answered her between intakes of air. “You are brilliant.”

She could hear he began to tire. He is out of practice....

Brienne could feel his grip wasn't what it ought to be. Her warriors instincts taking hold as she struck harder, in a continuous fury. She felt the pommel loosen further in his grasp. Jaime tried to clench his fingers as he continued. “And if I let you win today – you may as well finish me....”

He found a second wind, pushing forward in violent bursts attempting to shake Oathkeeper from her clutches. The Golden Lion is still in there.... She pushed back against one of his strikes with all her strength. Nearly shaking him off balance. Jaime planted his feet and held his ground against her, their bent arms drawing them close.

Once again she felt his sword quiver slightly against her Valyrian blade, a sign of an unsteady hold. “.....because I will lose everything. I'm fighting you - to be with you.”

Awareness flooded her. He knows why he is fighting – but do I? She wanted to marry Jaime. Longed to be with him. It was all she had wanted in the months she'd spent alone. All that she'd cried for and dreamt every night.

When their child was lost. When the Red Keep fell. When she'd broken her heart upon an empty beach.

It all lead to this moment. And what stood in her way was a rule she'd invented. As a young girl who despised the idea of being married to a controlling Lord.

Dreaded spending her life in misery wearing dresses and behaving like a well trained mute. Before her heart belonged to Jaime.

The bloodlust of battle screamed at her to finish him. Another man to knock in the dust. To make an example of and defeat. It raged an inferno in her blood. Jaime could not defeat her.

She knew it. He knew it. Everyone watching knew it.

Yet here he was trying – because he loved her. He had already battled under her command in Winterfell. Subjugating himself to her wishes. Cast away his fortune, his title and name. To protect her and forge a new beginning.

He would wound his pride. Kick his dignity to the curb. For the chance at their life together. To make her feel validated.

Slowly Brienne loosened her fingers on Oathkeeper's hilt. Jaime's eyes widened as she lowered the blade, he followed suit with his own. Holding the Valyrian steel point down in front of her she forgot all the bystanders, focussed solely on Jaime's face.
“I yield.” She released her grip, sending her beloved sword clattering to the pavers. It was never Oathkeeper she adored, it was always the man who gifted it to her. Jaime threw his own blade aside, freeing his hand to grasp her face and kiss her with abandon. Her left hand climbed shyly up his chest as she wrapped the other arm around him. The Knight reached into his pocket and produced her Sapphire, placing it ceremoniously on her finger to thunderous applause.

The loudest of which sounded from an overhanging balcony, where her Father stood smiling broadly at them.

Chapter End Notes

Dearest readers and my newfound friends,

I am aware that Sapphires is a very long fic but the story isn't over yet and it is (very happily I might add) taking over my life! Lol I was always going to make this a two part series but I have chosen to continue under the single story banner instead of splitting it. Therefore consider this a happy fluffy sub-ending. An intermission between Part One and Part Two.

In the second part (which will not be as long as the first) I intend to tie up the loose ends I've left hanging, address some of those burning concerns and continue to check points off my to do list. There will be some drama – so be prepared!

I will continue at my Chapter a Day Pace. I hope you decide to continue with me on this journey. You have all become part of my daily routine and I cherish each and every comment.

See you tomorrow in the next chapter/Second Act commences.

NightReaderEnigma
aka Madelyn :)}
And we're back!
I have to thank you all for the incredibly lovely comments I received after the last chapter.
I read them in my lunch break from work and ended up with happy tears ruining my make-up! (True Story)
Writing means so much to me.
I will try my best to be worthy of the praise and your continued time. :) 

The bustle of the bazaar was unnerving.
Essos exploded with riotous colours, foreign music and pungent scents.
It could make a reclusive wanderer queasy.

To everyone's assumption the man was blind. Milky pale eyes, clouding a vision of the world.
Though oddly he moved with purpose. Steered by the invader in his mind.
*His spirit is weak.*

The King manoeuvred his puppet in a shambling walk. The instruction to shift each leg transmitted over and over again.
It was not natural, as it would have been in your own body.
From what he remembered.

His Ravens could see much, but there were places they were unwelcome.
Especially in these distant lands. For this stretch he needed to go where only men could.
The underground Winesink a hive for discussions on the location of the great black beast.

With each skinchange his power grew stronger. Like a muscle learning to flex.
At one stage he had to meet the person in the flesh. Now he could overtake by focus alone.
It was all in the eyes.

Fix the image in your mind, see their face clearly.
Concentrate. Know their name.
For a connection over water, he must hold something of theirs in order to forge a solid link...

He knew the man's hair was twined between fingers, in the hand of his crippled shell.
The souse had passed out in the street, a frequenter of the Burrow's Well tavern.
It had not taken much for the birds to pluck it, but the trip delivering it to their master had taken far too long.

*When I wield the Dragon's power, it will all be worthwhile.*
Each time he visited the Weirwood he tried to access that version of the future.
But Drogon's whereabouts were still too far out of his reach for the threads of time to accommodate the possibility.

*Soon.* Bran thought from within the mind of Hermin Tulnack.
He shoved open the door to the dingy establishment.
His odd gait dismissed as drunkenness.
His foggy eyes a side effect of years of intoxication.

In odd jerking movements, he poured himself into a seat by the bar, glad that communication would not be required.
He had yet to perfect that skill.
“Back again, hey Herm. The usual?”
A nod was all that was needed.
Drink in hand he was free to sit and absorb information.

The Burrow was sparse this evening, the rumoured roving party he sought noticeably absent.
It was alleged they met here every third night, to exchange whispers on the movements of the Dragon.
_**I have time. I can wait.**_
He tuned himself in and out of surrounding conversations, hoping his untouched drink was not too conspicuous.

“Come on! I have bought barrels of Pear Brandy off you for years! They have never cost that much....”
“Yet that is the asking price.” The Tavern owner remained impassive regardless of the mans protests.
“Why the hike? I'm a loyal patron.”
“Supply in demand Gisson. What can I say?”
“What demand? This place is practically empty!”
“Take them or leave them.” He was stony of expression.

The buyer muttered to himself unhappily as he counted out the coin. “Taking advantage of my good nature. Its like everyone who's ever traded with me knows I'm a pushover. This wouldn't have happened if I had my negotiator....”
The barkeep laughed. “What's this now? Since when 'ave you been fancy enough to have a 'negotiator.'”
“I'll have you know I did for a while! Back in Westeros, helped me out in the Stormlands. Smart fellow. Only had one hand but could talk a bee out of its honey! Didn't hurt either that when he smiled the ladies just opened their purses. Could speak like a highborn so knew all the right things to say. If he was here you'd never rip me off like this.”
“And where is this mysterious negotiator now?” From the sarcastic way he asked, he wasn't believing the story.
“Ah, for some reason he insisted on being dropped off at Tarth. Some business with Evenfall Hall. Dumb idea if you ask me, but then blondes never were known for common sense.”

Hermin Tulnack dropped from his chair to the floor.
The misty white film receding as he convulsed.

* * *

In King's Landing a pair of brown eyes opened, staring out into the black night sky from the Terrace as he mused....

_**Is there any such thing as coincidence?**_
Chapter Notes

This is a lengthy multi-faceted chapter.

I am always determined to remain as realistic as I can.
Although pure fluff warms my heart, in real life people have mood swings and a
marker of a relationship is how this is handled by your partner.
To me it is a demonstration of strength and unshakable love.

Then we have the fact that I needed to work in a water scene.....because I just had to.
Oh and of course there are the plot developments..... :)

The skies were infinite azure and the weather was warming up.
The sun crawled its journey across the expanse of blue, lengthening days and springing forth fresh
foliage on the fertile island of Tarth.
Brienne had spent the last several weeks in an almost otherworldly splendour.
*The afterlife of the blessed can have nothing on this.....*

She sat upon a rocky outcrop, watching the waves crash upon the shore.
Absorbing the heat of the stone beneath her. The glow of radiant sunlight penetrating her pores and
making the golden haired man next to her shine like a mirage. The lunch they shared was sprawled
upon a cloth between them. For once even Jaime's chatter ebbed as he basked in the serenity.
*If only I could enjoy it.*

Conversations seemed to be all the nobles engaged in of late.
The larger issues which seemed so distant in their isolated corner of the world still required
addressing. The pressure fell heavily on her shoulders. Brienne was all too aware that their loved
up bubble was fragile.

After the first three days she had dismissed the ship and crew.
Returning them to the Blackwater Bay with a letter for Podrick, asking him to inform the King that
her trip may be lengthy. It was not a deception – she observed her father closely and became
increasingly concerned he was covering up the severity of his condition.

But then afterwards, he took a turn for the better. Seemingly heartened by her presence and his
newfound goal. Her father always thrived when he had an objective to work towards.
All he could speak of was their upcoming marriage.
He sought to school them in everything required to become the next Evenstars of Tarth.
His renewed purpose both effectively preparing for and preventing his end.
She was hesitant to leave her Father again given how much his spirits had bolstered. Yet still her
duty nagged at her, creating an uneasy tension in her shoulders. The growing urgency to finalise
that chapter of her life before she could immerse herself in the new. Of course she did not want to
go, but she was also postponing the inevitable. And her Father enabled it religiously.

Brienne had watched the moon become full, then wane to nonexistence. Each night she marked it's
progress reflected upon the midnight black salt waters from her balcony. By the time it had
reformed to half again a notable absence preoccupied her mind.
Though at that time she deemed it too soon to be certain.

“Do you swim?” Jaime finally allowed the silence to get the better of him. “I can. It was a good way to strengthen my muscles during adolescence.” She kept her answers clipped, she was not in a chatty mood. Providing Jaime with further details on her youth at Evenfall Hall wasn’t a topic that had crossed her mind during their bedtime talks. Each session had been concentrated upon relating another aspect of their journey. Slowly bridging their time apart. Every evening the most harrowing tale took precedence in her mind, only then to burn her eyes and never find its way past her lips.

Some nights her man seemed so happy, speaking warmly of the elderly fellow who saved him and enthusiastically sharing anecdotes about selling wine. She would watch his eyes shine as they crinkled at the corners and could not bear to sink his buoyancy. One evening she had steeled herself for hours beforehand, determined that the time was ripe. An atmosphere in the air compelling her to verbalise her pain and find release in his embrace. Instead inexplicably, it had been Jaime who finally divulged the tale of Cersei’s end. Confessing he had put a flaming torch to his twin’s body and charred her away to ash. The admission racked him so, Brienne ended up encircling him in her arms. Wrapping him up tightly as he trembled. She knew then it was not the night to add to his burden.

Following his line of sight, Brienne could guess the reason behind Jaime’s query. They were baking in the sun and he gazed longingly at the water. She turned the tables on him. “Can you swim?” “I can.....” Do I sense a touch of reluctance? “Contrary to the fact that I nearly drowned in our bath. And a river.....actually forget it. Let's pass on the open ocean. I simply wanted an excuse to see you all wet and dripping again. It was too cold in the North and I looked at the bath tubs here and we are never going to fit. Maybe I should speak to your Father about that-” Her expression was sceptical. “Are you going to tell him the reason?” Jaime opened his mouth to reply but then shut it again. Someone’s learning.

The Lady Knight rose, brushing the stray crumbs and grains of sand from her lap. “Come on.” “Where are we going?” “You will see.” She walked off, taking for granted that he would follow.

* * *

“If you manage to collapse or almost drown in this, I will be forced to break our engagement.” Brienne had lead him across an expanse of rock to a hidden treasure. A sizeable tidal pool lay before them, not a whisper of air disturbing its surface, perfect as glass. The water crystal clear, transparent to the very bottom. It looked much more inviting that the turbulent sea beyond.

Jaime nodded, emitting a low whistle. “I’m impressed. How did you know this was here?” The Lady Knight sat, unbuckling her swordbelt and gently placing Oathkeeper aside, she still refused to go anywhere without it. Much devotion had been spent to lovingly tending the blade after its impromptu collision with the pavers. “Where did you think I learned to swim?” She removed her boots, noting that they may never be free of sand again. “And suitable attire?” “Obviously will not fit me anymore. A fact which you guessed full well.” She huffed at him in annoyance as she peeled off her tunic. “We are unlike to be disturbed. This location is secret. It's considered part of the castle grounds.”
Jaime craned his neck to see past the cliff-face up the steady rise. She knew if he moved far enough to the left he would see the turrets of Evenfall Hall above. From where she sat next to the pool it disappeared. They were invisible.

“I like this place a lot.” He declared.

“So pleased.” Brienne unlaced the front of her undershirt letting it hang upon.

Now sitting, Jaime was beginning to undress himself - an excruciating process to witness. She never wanted to make him feel useless but at the same time she longed to offer help. It made her glad when in fits of passion she had an excuse to tear him free of his clothes.

Sidling up to him, she placed a tender kiss on his lips as she began to untie the knot at his collar.

“I know what you're doing Brienne.” His voice was like silk. “First you are bickering with me, now suddenly you kiss me?”

“It's not pity – it's love.” She assured him.

“I know that Wench. I've said a similar sentiment to you before. Not so easy when the boot is on the other foot.”

She cringed. “I deserved that.”

Jaime took the opportunity to nuzzle into her neck. “I appreciate the help.”

He sneakily slipped his now free hand beneath her shift, parting it at the front to caress her breast.

“What? I am making myself feel better for being crippled. If you only have one hand at least it can be used for something interesting-” He trailed off, losing his train of thought as he glanced down at her exposed flesh. Tilting his head to one side. She could see cogs turning in his mind but for once he didn't express them.

She stood up briskly. “Are we going for a swim or not?”

“Right after you.”

She turned her back to him to remove the last of her clothes before plunging into the water.

* * *

“Brienne...” She heard Jaime's voice calling to her. It seemed distant yet so near.

Nudging, her pillow shifted beneath her head....

“Did you just fall asleep?”

She opened her eyes with a start to blinding brightness and shimmering water.

Her mind raced to remember the events of the last few minutes -

*We hadn't been swimming long, Jaime pulled me into an embrace, I lay my head upon his shoulder, it was so warm.....*

“You needn't be so judgmental! I haven't gotten any rest. I have a lot more concerns than you do, we didn't all erase our presence from the world!” Her voice bit more than she intended, embarrassment creeping in.

*How could I fall asleep?* She hated appearing weak.

“Hey – there is no need to get defensive. If you need sleep it is fine. I wasn't upset.” Jaime grinned at her like it was all a big joke. “I had to wake you up - I nearly did drown after all.”

“What are you saying?” She sensed an undercurrent, an implied double meaning. The humour was always at her expense.

“That I had to keep you afloat and you are taller than me.”

Brienne angrily lashed the surface, sending a propulsion of salt water into the air and up Jaime's nose. “Another jape at my height? Really?”

She pushed far away from him, relocating to the opposite side of the pool as he spluttered.

“No....” He coughed and swiped at his nose. “Just....observations on stature and....it was meant to be a jest.” Jaime seemed quite taken aback by the severity of her reaction.
The Lady Knight treaded water as her heart rate slowly returned to normal. She felt so irrationally irritable. The feeling had been dogging her all day. Her attempts to suppress it had only resulted in an outburst. She found the whole incident quite disconcerting. She always took pride in her self control.

“I'm sorry – I don't know why I snapped.” Searching her mind for a quick explanation she added. “I think I'm overtired.”

“You must be, one moment we were talking and the next minute....” He closed his eyes in imitation. Brienne could tell he was being careful not to provoke her.

“It's not your fault Jaime, truly. I...haven't felt myself today and I have so much on my mind. Time is passing and....”

“You don't have to explain to me.” His tone was not unkind, instead fused with understanding and tolerance. “You never have to justify yourself to me.”

“Now you are just serving to make me feel guilty.” She mumbled to her sternum. “Why? You disagree with me on a daily basis. It's how we communicate.” He smiled. “That's different and you know it.”

Jaime inhaled and exhaled deeply. She watched his chest rise and fall. A sinking feeling that she had done something terrible gnawed at her soul. Her ferocity had been uncalled for, her emotions erratic. She berated herself for such unconscionable and inexcusable behaviour.

“Brienne, do you honestly think we are going to spend the rest of our lives together and not have disagreements? And I mean real ones. Not our banter.” She stared at him, not knowing how to respond.

“Because that's not how relationships work. You know my loving you is unconditional right?”

There it was, the seed of panic. It kept her from crossing a line. It had urged her to reign in her disagreeable disposition all day. Even if I have a reason....

“Someone like me does not have the luxury of being high maintenance.”

“Tell me you don't truly believe that?”

“I shouldn't test my luck.”

“My Lady after everything we've been through do you really think I would be that shallow?”

“No – just....”

“What about the Dragonpit? You publically admonished me then.”

“That was different. I had nothing to lose.”

“So you let fly and I argued back. Then I thought about what you said and I came to my senses. No permanent damage done and it made us stronger.” He swam a little closer, eyeing her warily like a wild animal who may pounce at any moment. He hypersensitivity wondered if it was real or another jape but his countenance was solely affectionate. “I can handle difficulties. The occasional reprimand. A bad mood. It's not going to diminish my love for you. We are not built on such unstable ground. I am not saying I will always relent. There will be many times I won't submit. And then you'll be the one having to deal with my Lannister temper. But we can work through it.”

She managed a small twitch at the corners of her mouth. “Today I've been impossible, I know it. And I can't guarantee I won't continue to be.”

“That's alright, you alone can put me through all Seven Hells. You're my woman, it's your right.”

A flutter of happiness vibrated through her. “Say that again.”

“Which part?”

She swam closer, her annoyance dissipating into the abyss. “The woman part.”

Jaime gave her one of those soul melting smiles. “You're my woman.”

Brienne wrapped her arms around him again. “That's a far cry from what you used to call me.”

“I know better now.”

He was rewarded with a kiss. “This isn't how I wanted our swim to go.” She stroked his cheek with tremulous fingers. “I'm not generally like this.”
“I know that. Don't you think I could tell something was amiss all day?”
“You know me that well?”
“Of course I do.” He pressed his lips to her temple.

They lingered in the moment, allowing themselves to just hold each other and drift. Brienne waited for the leaden weight which had gathered in her chest to ease. She knew she had surrendered to a deviation from her regular personality. If Jaime wasn't holding her, the shame of letting it win just may drag her under the surface.

“Did we just have our first argument?” She asked him. “Officially as a betrothed couple?”
“Well I wasn't fighting.”
She huffed. “That doesn't help.”
“Now that I have disagreed with you about that though - I think yes.”
“You are-” She pecked his cheek. “-Exasperating.”
“You wouldn't have me any other way Wench.”

Brienne watched the waves curl in the distance, the fine mist of seaspray raining down. Jaime ran his hand soothingly up and down the length of her spine. “Don't forget what you said to me earlier.” He purred into her ear. “It's not pity – it's love. Would you have me curb my tongue because I am a one handed man and therefore should be grateful that a mighty warrior such as yourself deigns to be with me?”
She kept her gaze trained on the distant horizon as she held her tongue. Sometimes she would very much like him to learn to do the same. Just not for the reasons he stated. The irony gladdened her.

*He really doesn't know when to shut up but I can't tell him that.*
“Know what you're thinking.....” He cajoled.
“You don't.” Her uplifted tone showed they were teasing again.
“I do-”
Brienne couldn't do anything else to silence Jaime but kiss him. A glorious sense of bonding overwhelming her in the wake of their unrest. Another relationship angst allayed. It was difficult to admit to herself that Jaime often exhibited how he was the older and wiser in love. His experience evolving him beyond fearing the bumps in their path which she turned into mountains. How simply her mood could transition with a few reassuring words. She wished she hadn't let it get the better of her – she hadn't told him the entire truth as to the origins of her behaviour. But that was for another time.

Pressing close and deepening their kiss, she coaxingly wrapped her legs around him, hoping he'd take the hint. Keen to reaffirm their connection.

*This is far more what I had hoped from our dip....*

* * *

“Nap.” Jaime encouraged.
He had dried off using one of the linens which bound their lunch pack and now was finishing getting dressed.
The larger cloth he had given to her.
“I can't, it feels too self indulgent. I'm not used to being idle.” Brienne did not see how the thin fabric could be useful for drying, so instead she had draped it over herself and opted for sitting in the afternoon beams. The heated stone beneath rapidly evaporating the droplets as she dripped dry.

“All the more reason why you should be. Change of pace. You fell asleep in the middle of our conversation and that was before.....” He left the sentence hanging and chuckled.
"More physical exertion?" She suggested.
"Not quite how I'd put it but it serves." Jaime strolled over and sat beside her.
"Lie down." He patted his thigh, indicating she could rest her head upon it.
"It's rocks."
"You've slept on worse. Hard ground, tied to a tree, our bed in Winterfell..."
Physically she acquiesced, arranging the cloth as she moved to ensure she wasn't exposed.
She did not want to concede that she was even more tired now, the combination of sunshine, water
and spontaneous lovemaking sapping the last of her energy.
As she lay her head in his lap, she couldn't resist debating his last comment.

"MY...bed in Winterfell, which you commandeered. And what was wrong with it?"
"The Starks are so damn masochistic, they probably think an uncomfortably hard straw mattress is
character building. Give me an over abundance of feather down anyday."
"Snob." She prodded playfully. "Aren't we a little precious? You sound worse than a woman. It
was perfectly adequate and if you didn't like it there was always your own."
"Mine was even worse than yours and besides I was in your bed for the company not the mattress."
"That bed served us well."
"It did – we were like to break it."
Brienne closed her eyes and hoped her face didn't betray her amusement.

"You know you would have made a wonderful Lioness. Golden mane, likes lying around on rocks,
soaking up rays...you'd make a Lion very happy." The timbre of his voice had shifted, to a pitch
rueful and nostalgic.
"Do you miss your name?"
"Sometimes. When I think on our marriage. It's difficult to pretend to be someone that you're not.
Take the little ones for example....they all called me Duncan or Ser Bluestone. I didn't want to lie to
them. It's one of the reasons I encouraged my nickname."
He quietened after the revelation. Brienne felt his fingers stroking her hair, brushing the remaining
sand and salt water from her forehead.
It was rhythmic and intimate.

After a short time she could feel herself drifting. The light penetrating her eyelids turning the world
to burnt orange. Her breathing began to deepen steady and strong.
When Jaime resumed talking she focussed more on the sound of his voice than the words.
"That swim certainly ended differently from our last one. I wonder if we shall ever have a
waterborne encounter where one of us doesn't collapse on the other is some form or another."
"Who knows."
He quietened, barely audible.
In her sleepy state she pictured her life, here like this with Jaime.
She could be this way forever. Content in life and love. . .

At the edge of her fading awareness she heard a queer sound. Gradually growing louder.
The steady glow beneath her lids became spattered with shadows as swiftly moving figures
blocked the sun.
She felt Jaime's muscles tense beneath her neck.
Her senses rushed back as she identified the sound – Cawing.

Brienne sat up abruptly. 
High above a flock of ravens flew in unwavering formation towards Evenfall Hall. 
Jaime was rigid as he looked at her for answers. His warriors intuition keening. "Tell me that's
migratory."
She knew better, they had come from afar. "No. Ravens are uncommon on Tarth. We are more
prone to seabirds."
"The scheming wretch!"
"Jaime we do not know -"
“His spies cannot be here! Brienne, he is checking up on you! He is verifying the condition of Selwyn!”

Her blood ran cold. “Father is up and about today. He is well.”
Jaime scrambled to his feet and seized Oathkeeper, whilst she dashed for her clothes.
*It will take me time to dress.*
Her man had come to the same conclusion....

“Tell me what he does Brienne! What will happen once they are inside?”
“I can't be certain. The Ravens seek out the information he wants. The household won't know they are more spies than birds. Our guards will catch them or kill them eventually. But if he sees Father, he will know the truth and it will lead to more discovery. You must find him before they do.”
He nodded and turned to run.
The Lady Knight tried not to panic. *I should be the one going.* But time was not on their side.
“Jaime! Don't be seen.”
Cresting updrafts, coasting slipstream, he was all and he was one. 
Each trained directly ahead. 
The immense castle loomed before them with its numerous balconies and windows, providing limitless passageways to answers. 
The walls grew larger, the turrets closer, skewed by speed and beady eyed vision. 
Conserving energy until the final moment. 
Details emerged – oaken doors, marble railings, weather beaten bricks.... 
Then foreseeable obstacles – flapping curtains, attentive staff, guards patrolling the parapets.... 
Timing was key on swift black wings. 
Moving in perfect unison. 
An inch closer, another feathered beat at the air. 
\textit{Glide, propel -} 
Choosing their mark. 
\textit{Glide....} 
A bird sized brain received the pulsation, stimulating their navigation. 
\textit{Propel....} 
Steady their minds, for peak observation. 
\textit{Glide....} 
He would puppeteer many at once - 
\textit{Break formation.} 

Swooping down, veering sharply they simultaneously penetrated the stronghold. 
Bursting across various thresholds and frames, storming multiple levels and locations. 

Their mission transmitted relentlessly. 
\textit{Find.} 
\textit{Find.} 

* * * 

The first sound to reach Jaime was an ear splitting shriek, reverberating from within the second
floor. He raced across the cobbled stones to one of the side entrances. Hurriedly beckoning a guard who seemed nonplussed about the unfolding invasion.

“Helmet!” Jaime demanded. “Beg pardon Ser?” The soldier tore his gaze from above. “Give me your helmet! And rouse the off-duty guards. Orders are to dispose of every last bird quickly and efficiently. Consider it training.”

“Right away Castellan!”

Jaime snatched the helmet from the man's arm, fitting it over his head and lowering the visor. It impeded his vision but disguised his identity. Racing inside he ascended the stairs two at a time.

*They seem to have converged on the upper levels.*

By the time he reached the third landing he was greeted with cacophonous cawing. Maids fled, flailing their arms and squealing as great black birds funneled down the hall and disappeared into adjoining rooms, only to rematerialize seconds later.

No two travelled in the same direction.

Household guards ran haphazardly after them, armour clanking, boots thudding against the floorboards.

Jaime ducked sideways as one of the dark messengers tore past. A solitary black feather drifting ominously down in its wake. He retracted his right arm further into his sleeve, wishing for the first time in ages he could disguise his stump with a prosthetic. *They are moving too fast to notice. He reassured himself.*

Spurred into action he slammed a door shut after one of the birds entered, trapping it inside. “Get in there.” He grabbed one of the flummoxed guards by the shoulder, shoving him towards the room.

*One down.* By his estimation there had been at least a dozen.

Two young chamber maids clung wide eyed to the walls as another raven dove unnervingly close. They could not look more frightened if they were hostages on a battlefield. “Where is Lord Selwyn?” He demanded. This was not the time for civilities. “I-In his preferred sitting room Ser. The one with the fireplace.”

*Good. A considerable distance down the hall with a few twists and bends. Though further for me to reach him...*  

“Thank you. Now move. They are just birds. Close all the doors on this floor. If you catch one inside fetch a guard. We need to restrict their movements.”

Jaime moved as swiftly as he could navigating the chaos. Ducking low as a bird soared overhead, he raised Oathkeeper with lightning speed.

Slicing the creature clean in two from behind.

Inky chunks spattered by gore rolling lifelessly as they landed upon the carpet.

Never to rise and spy again.

*Two.* Jaime counted. *I must get to Selwyn.*

* * *

His forces were depleting.

*He lost control of one raven as it went careening into a closed glass window. It's neck breaking*
with a sickening crack.

To another.

Trapped in a room, with two guards closing in. No escape.

Next.

A terrified maid smacked it mid flight. It's bones crushing in from the impact of the iron fireplace shovel.

Switch.

A heavy door slammed suddenly in its path, the feathered agent bounced off the wood, falling dazed to the rug only for the world to go dark as it was smothered beneath a blanket.

Onwards.

This bird flew mightily.
Higher. It was urged.
It sailed above head height following the long hallway.
More and more doors were shut to their exploration.
The women scampering below sealing them systematically.
Further.

The pandemonium evened out as he pushed ahead of the flock.
Weaving through left and right turns into an internal private part of the castle.
More Lordly. The King had insight the bird did not.

Searching was more methodical than thorough.
One swift circle of a room and out again.

“Is their a meaning to all of this commotion I can hear!”
A male voice. Elder. Commanding.
He does not sound at all frail....

Following its source, the bird rounded one last bend.
This room was inhabited.
Flickering flames visible beyond the doorway.

Drifting in on silent wings his emissary alighted upon the back of a chair.
The bird tilting its head to the side studiously.

The man before him stood tall and proud despite his age.
Noticeably bothered by the inconvenience of the intrusion.
“What in the name of the Seven?”

He has her eyes.

* * *

Jaime sprinted as he watched the raven enter Selwyn's quarters.
Out of breath but determined he burst into the sitting chamber.

The scene chilled him to the bone.
The shadowy messenger perched on a chair back. Its sinister pitch black eyes regarding his future good-father in an almost human way. So intent was its assessment, his arrival had gone unnoticed.

*Jaime did not hesitate.*
*With a single arcing blow, he severed its abominable head from its body.*

* * *

*Jolted back to the Terrace the Warg took a deep breath.*
*“Summon my Master of Ships – a vessel must be despatched to Tarth.”*
Crisis talks at Evenfall Hall... “I am no simpleton but I fail to understand.” Brienne watched her Father shake his head vehemently. Her heart constricted for him. He had spent his life so set on believing the world was a certain way. It troubled him to have his perceptions shattered. “When did Raven's stop being more than what they appear? It sounds like a tale we use to scare little boys into behaving.”

“Father, I have seen all manner of unnatural things that would terrify. The King's abilities just being one of them.” She reached over and squeezed his arm. They sat in a small drawing room overlooking the sea. A fire crackled in the hearth for light rather than warmth. The curtains were pulled right back so the oceanic breezes mitigated its heat. Each positioned themselves on a cushioned high back chair which had been arranged into close proximity. The three points of their new triadic system. The staff had been dismissed so they could speak privately.

Jaime crossed the room to refill his cup with warm spiced milk, returning wordlessly to take Brienne's own. She smiled slightly and shook her head, looking down at the now cooled beverage cradled in her hands. She had barely touched it. Her stomach was too unsettled. Whenever she beheld her own fingers she still felt a rush of exhilaration upon seeing her sapphire. The dark smooth surface of the stone looking almost black in the dim light. An anchor binding her to the future. I will have to remove it soon.....

“You forget we fought the undead Selwyn. After that anything's possible.” Her future husband returned, stooping to kiss the top of her head before taking his seat. He knew she was disturbed by today's events. Her Father had become more accustomed to witnessing their displays of affection. Though Brienne ensured they were limited to demonstrative rather than impassioned. The Evenstar had decidely not remarked upon their shared sleeping arrangements again and this pleased everyone involved.

The Lady Knight sat straighter, readying to present her argument. In her steady Commander's tone she began. “The ramifications of this afternoon's development will have a great affect on us all and how we proceed. As to establishing its origins, we can be guided by what we know - King Bran sent his Ravens. They are his eyes and ears. It means he is seeking something. Knowledge – presumably about the state of Father's health. Now that the excuse for my presence here has been removed we are left with no option but for my immediate return.”

“Daughter you cannot be serious!” Lord Selwyn was appalled at the notion. “If what you both say is true – and I am willing to accept that it is because I trust you both. Then to return to the clutches of such a person is madness!”

“At this stage the damage can be undone. I can say I was preparing my departure and that I am
relieved at your recovery. When I get there I will state my case for dismissal from my duties.”
“This so called 'King' has demonstrated mistrust of you Brienne. Otherwise he would have sought information through formal avenues. His invasion of my stronghold this afternoon was an act of aggression.”
She threw back her head in frustration. Studying the cracks on the ceiling.
He means well. . .
“All the more reason why his doubts about me - about us should be eradicated as quickly as possible.”

“Why his sudden interest?” Jaime's voice broke into the Tarth debate. “What triggered it? He believed you up until this point. What changed?”
Her Father pointed his finger and nodded. “Well done, you are thinking as a seasoned battle strategist. Now speak some sense to my daughter.”
Brienne huffed. “He is theorising as someone who has a severe mistrust of the King and a lot of poignant history with him.”
Lord Selwyn leant towards Jaime. “Should I ask?”
The former lion shook his head.
“You both forget that I have sworn a vow to protect this person.” She fixed imploring stares upon both her Father and lover in turn. “I am by no means implying that I do not have my misgivings about his character. There has been many an occasion where I have had to suppress them. But – he has given me no direct cause for concern. He gave me leave to come here in both instances and I still require another favour from him. I need to be released from my post. It is best if he is kept on side.”

“Send a letter.” Her Father was firm. “Say that I require you here and ask to be relieved from your duties. Lord Commander's have been made at a distance – look at your own betrothed - they can be unmade in kind. This will keep you from harm's way.”
Brienne was incredulous. “You spent your life instilling in me a sense of honour and responsibility, yet you advise me to relinquish something as sacred as the vows of the King's Guard via a letter? Sent by Raven I might add.” She had to point out the hypocrisy.

“Where is his honour?! Today my castle was stormed! Besieged by an army of flying spies! If I caught one single human acting in the same manner you would not be taking it so lightly. His unprovoked infiltration was an instigator of war. Old I may be, out of touch from the mainland perhaps - but I am still a Lord! And as long as I rule over this castle and this island I will not accept disrespect and surveillance from a newly made monarch. You will stay here – away from dark arts and winged monstrosities.”
He rose powerfully to his feet. She had not heard this tone from him since she was a little girl. Chastising as he ordered her to comply.
“I will agree with one point you made Daughter. Indeed to keep the beasts here is contradictory. So I decree – from this night onwards. No more Ravens will be accepted at Tarth!”

“Do you not think that taking this path of action will only cloak us further in suspicion!”
“Better for him to wonder than discover. Better for us to deal with mortal enemies of flesh and bone.”
Brienne stood. Towering to meet her Father in strength and exceed him in height. “Prolonging my departure will only serve to aggravate our predicament further! Time is of the essence, our window of opportunity is small and closing!”
“The window is gone. Slammed shut with the beating of a dozen pairs of black wings. Surely you can see this daughter – I am protecting you.”
“And I am protecting Jaime, us, our home! My future!”
“Once you are there in his grasp, what can we do to retrieve you? He is a King, we are one House. What future do you forsee then Brienne? You place a lot of faith in this shady character.”
“If he comes here Father? What then! If he sends his armies when you slaughter his birds?”
“Then we place you and your future Lord husband upon a boat for Essos.”
“Flee?! Where is the Honour in that?”

The current and future Evenstars glared at each other.
Blue eyes ablaze with their shared tenacity and stubborn streaks.
They had reached a stalemate.
Brienne turned to Jaime. “You are quiet. Do you have an opinion? Yours is the deciding vote.”

“I think there are too many unknowns.” He had remained unusually silent during their heated exchange. “I believe there is safety in that as well as danger.”
“What do you mean?” Brienne checked herself.
This is an open discussion, I should not naturally assume Jaime will take my side.
She reclaimed her seat and gave him her full attention.

“I want to know why he sent them.”
“That's something you cannot possibly find out.” Lord Selwyn eased himself back into his chair.
Brienne noticed him try to conceal his wince of pain.
He shouldn't overdo it....

“My desire is to protect Brienne. But I struggle to see a happy ending unfolding from challenging the Three Eyed Raven. We do not know his capabilities – how they've expanded or what he can actually see. With the powers of the Six Kingdoms at his disposal it greatly lessens our odds of success.” Jaime sighed. “However the birds were sent on reconnaissance. It is not necessarily belligerence or at least not yet. His official stance was pending whatever information he could glean. All he knows is that your Father is not as frail as we portrayed. It is not ideal but it is salvageable. I just worry that we are misconstruing his aim. What if your father wasn't his goal? That's a large gamble to make on someone I love.”
“So you know how I feel.” Brienne leaned forward, her eyes locking on Jaime's. “I need to go and lay his questions to rest. Then he will dig no further.”
“There is a high likelihood he will persist anyway.” Her Father interjected. “If he is intent on a greater objective then mere curiosity about my health and when his personal guard is returning.”

“With a ban on Ravens he is blinded.” Jaime thought aloud. “At the same time it will heighten his curiosity. This is where I think indecision is our savior.”
“How?” Brienne did not comprehend his logic.
“Spontaneous thought. The rumour mill at Winterfell claimed that when tapped into the Weirwood, he could traverse time. If this is accurate – everything becomes dire. But if it was completely true, we wouldn't have made it this far. He must have limitations. If we are yet to decide our course of action then he cannot forsee it either. Planning ahead just became our nemesis.”

“Yet your scheming worked for us up to this point.” Brienne was dismayed by all this subterfuge. It was far too complicated.
“Because I gave him what he wanted, he searched no further. This is a different game. Now he is looking and we don't know why. The dark master's eyes are on Tarth. We have to live in the moment. Tackle each hurdle as it comes.” Jaime was wrapped up in his tangent.
“Or I can leave and pacify all of this.”
“I am yet to make my decision Brienne and for tonight at least I find comfort in the uncertainty.”

Brienne relented - only for the time being.
She had kept her beloved Jaime in the dark about some of the more crucial attributes of their
situ
tion.
He does not know what I do.....it is time I tell him.

* * *

Alone in his chambers, Lord Selwyn could not quieten his thoughts.
The foundations of natural order and his beliefs shaken to the very core.
He wanted to protect his wilful daughter from these aberrant forces.
To restore some semblance of normality.

Taking up parchment and ink he scribed:

____________________________________________________________________________

To King Bran the Broken, First of His Name -

We have not met in person but we know much of each other.
I write to address recent circumstances in a formal, acceptable medium.
I am affronted by your decision to appraise my condition through unconventional measures.
I can appreciate the value which my daughter holds in your Court and that her extended absence must cause you distress.
However – as a Father, I retain the right to have my child present for the conclusion of my life's work.
And as a Lord – whose House's support helped to place you upon your throne – I maintain my right to privacy.

I respectfully request an immediate cease to any and all surveillance physical or otherwise and abolishment to any premature attempts to recall my Daughter – Ser Brienne of Tarth to the Capital.

House Tarth remains faithful to the Crown.
Sincerely,

Lord Selwyn Tarth
of Evenfall

____________________________________________________________________________

Summmoning his manservant with a ring of the bell, he requested the attendance of his Maester.
As the Evenstar pressed his seal into the wax, the robed man arrived, harried and out of breath.

“Is it your health My Lord?”
“No, Maester Bextor. I require your skills in Ravenry – not medicine.”

The man was visibly relieved. “How may I assist?”
“I need you to cage all your Ravens – omitting one, who has been trained for King's Landing.
Tomorrow you will send it with this message.” He handed the sealed letter to the Maester.
“As for the rest of your birds. Their cages are to be covered in sheets. They will be carried down to the docks by my retinue of Guards and placed on a boat bound for the Citadel.”
Jaime paced a continuous line in her chambers. A gutted mix of irate and frantic. Raking his hand through his hair, eyes red and wet with unshed tears. He stopped only to grip his temples between thumb and forefinger, burying his face in his palm. Brienne sat upon the end of their bed, her own blue lakes bursting their banks without sound as she watched his shoulders shake with a violent sob. He composed himself only to resume the process.

“Jaime...” Her voice was soft, choked by emotion. First it had been the agony of saying the words aloud. Of remembering the loss. Now it was the torment of watching the man she loved suffer. Another tear slipped down her cheek, falling, leaving a perfect circle where it soaked the hem of her tunic. She swiped them away with the back of her hand. *I must be strong for Jaime now....*

“Jaime.” Brienne spoke again. Louder this time. “How could she?” He stopped, facing the wall of the far side of the room. Speaking to no one in particular. Empty space. The hole in his heart. The Gods. She knew what he was picturing. What he was seeing. “How fucking dare she!” He slammed his fist into the wall, not even feeling the pain. Catching himself against it one armed, he bowed his head. His body quivered again, weeping breathily. “I never should have left you.”

The Lady Knight rose from the bed and crossed the room, wrapping her arms around him from behind, laying her head against his. Through his back she felt every heave. Her hands on his chest resting against his hammering heart. “It was not your fault.” She crooned, kissing the back of his neck. “You did what you could for us. You did it well. We are here together.”

He whirled around in her arms, so they were nose to nose. She lifted her hand to his face, catching his tears with her thumb. “If I had known....” Jaime's voice was scarce a whisper. “I never would have left you.” “I did not even know. I was ignorant. In hindsight I realise now naïve I was.” “I should know better. I have walked this road before. I was so focussed on the wolves behind every door I forgot the fundamentals of a man and a woman.” “Shhhhh.” She kissed his forehead. Rubbing a soothing hand up and down his chest. “You were alone – you never should have been.” “This was not our failing Jaime. Believe me. It took me a long time to forgive myself. If I had realised, if I hadn't been at practice, if I hadn't drunk that tea......” Her tears welled again, she swallowed past the lump in her throat. “But there is no use in recriminations now. Nothing is going to undo what was done. I had to bid our babe of Winter farewell.”

Jaime folded her into an embrace. “You are so brave. There is no other woman like you in existence. I can't begin to imagine what it was like for you.” “And I you. When I think of your struggles. We are warriors Jaime. We battle on. It's what we do.” She laced her fingers through his own, lifting his hand to her lips to kiss his bruised and bloodied knuckles.
He will need tending to.

Brienne tugged gently on his arm as she returned to her spot on the end of the bed. Hoping he would follow and sit. She could feel the anger and tension in his iron grip. He withdrew from her instead. His tears drying to fuming rage. “I'm going to kill her. I swear.” “What of your Oath to Catelyn?” “Screw the Oath! She murdered our child when it was just beginning, wholly innocent. When it was inside you. She could have killed you too. What if it had gone wrong?” “But it didn't.” “I always knew the Starks had rivers of ice in their veins but this is despicable beyond. No one capable of such a callous act deserves to live.”

The Lady Knight took a deep breath. “Jaime – if I speak will you listen to me? For I have had many a night to think upon it when I was alone in the White Tower. I know you are angry but please hear me out.” “I will hear no defence of them! Yes them. That's what I said and I meant it. If you think that her brother did not have a hand in this termination, then you are truly blindsided.” Brienne was all empathy, she knew to ignore his harsh tone. “If that is true - I have no proof. Sansa ordered the armour cleaned, she gave me the tea. It stands to reason she organised my beating as well.” Jamie cringed. “Don't say it. I can't stand it. Those words being said. Those things being done. To you and our baby.”

“I do not plan to defend her. I have mourned the death of our Winter Babe more than anyone can imagine. When I thought you were lost to me as well, it intensified the pain threefold. But I have made my peace with Sansa and Catelyn both. She is a girl damaged Jaime. One who's initiation into womanhood and the world was fraught with atrocities. When all was said and done she cleansed herself in much the same way as she did to me. In her twisted logic, she was doing me a favour. Ridding me of a stain left upon me by the treacherous Kingslayer. It does not make it right and I will never forgive her. But I believe she does not realise what she has done. She will never feel love, not like what you and I share. Her heart is hardened, bitten by frost. She has no true friends – I was one of her sole allies. So, I turned my back on her in punishment. I placed aside my duty to her and let her return North without protection. Never again will she have as loyal a guard as I would have been and whatever the Seven decide for her fate she will face it alone. It is small consolation but it is enough. You do not need to blacken your own heart by plotting revenge. Hate is never the answer but love always is. Look to our future Jaime. Love reunited us. Love will give us something to live for.”

Jaime was staring at her, awe and adoration writ upon his handsome face. “You are...I have no words Wench. The goodness in you, your capacity to see beyond yourself. This world doesn't deserve you. I know I certainly don't. But I love you, I'm honoured that you're with me.” “I am not so pure of spirit. If you could know the acts I imagined committing in retaliation before I made my peace. You have only just found out. The wound will take time to heal.”

Brienne reached over to take his hand again, this time he stepped towards her. She tilted her head to gaze up at him. Her man, her golden lion. She knew that face, she knew his heart. All his hurts and all his secrets. Now he needed to know hers...

“We lost our babe of Winter but now it is the Spring...and Spring brings with it new life.” She placed his hand upon her stomach, flattening it open palmed beneath her own.
Smiling, she waited for him to catch on.
Jaime's eyes widened, flooded with understanding.
“I'm pregnant.”

“Are you sure?” The way his face lit up, she would never forget. Not in a thousand lifetimes.
“Yes – I have suspected for a while but I was waiting. I have learnt. I knew what to watch for this time.”
Jaime pressed a crushing kiss to her lips and her smile beamed beneath it. “I take it that means you're happy about it?”
“Yes! Gods! Of course I am....Brienne.” The way he said her name was intoxicating.
His hand never left her stomach. He rubbed it gently with his thumb the way he so often did to show his affection.

“I believe we conceived on the night of your return.”
“It would make sense.” He knelt on the floor in front of her, his expression so tender it brought tears to her eyes once more. Jaime regarded her as though she was the most precious thing he had ever seen, giving him the most glorious gift. Her emotions had been out of control and she felt guilty for her lack of restraint.
“T'm sorry about earlier today Jaime – I have no handle over what I'm feeling.” She was crying again. “It's a foreign concept for me.”
“It's alright.” He embraced her, laying his head against her stomach. “Everything you do is perfectly fine with me.”
She stroked the side of his face and chuckled through the tears. “Good – because if so far has been any indication you are in for a trying time.”
“I'll take it all.” Jaime fell silent.
For a long pause they held each other, breathing, grieving, rejoicing.
Then her man spoke. “Thank you – you are giving me everything I've ever dreamed of.”
“I love you Jaime, with all my heart – no thanks is necessary.”

* * *

“You realise how this changes things.” Brienne lay on her back in the centre of their bed, absentmindedly caressing Jaime's hair. She had bathed and bandaged his knuckles whilst he protested, claiming he was so enamoured he could feel no pain. Now he rested his head in the crook of her arm, cheek pressed against her chest. His right arm wrapped protectively around her stomach. They had been like that for a long while. The incandescent glow of their sconces birthing abstract silhouettes which danced above.

She tried to focus on the greater issues but kept distracting herself, fondling his golden locks chased with silver and wondering if their child would inherit his mane or her own lighter shade of blonde.
“I cannot be Lady Commander and expecting. If anyone were to discover my condition it would unravel everything. What lover did I take?
Who, how? They will know I have broken my vows. It will lead to danger and disgrace. I must leave for King's Landing with haste, before my womb begins to swell.”
“How I long to see that.” Evidently Jaime was not concentrating either. Grinning like an idiot at the idea of her burgeoning belly.
“Jaime – this is serious. I need to relinquish my post in the Kingsguard, return here and we must be married. All preferably before it becomes obvious to everyone involved what we have been doing.”
“You sound like your Father – worried about reputations.”
“It's not just that...” Even now she remained self-conscious about divulging her superficial anxieties.
“....I'm going to have a hard enough task making myself look half presentable as a Lady and bride,
let alone with a heavily pregnant belly.”
“I don't give two coppers what you wear, I think bearing us an heir takes precedence.”
“Yes, but you won't be the only person attending and its embarrassing. I will be uncomfortable enough as it is. You know I hate being gawked at.”
“Other than your Father, who will actually be coming? Nobody knows who I am.”
They slipped into a hush. Brienne watched the shadows shift in their enigmatic patterns as she admonished herself for never being satisfied.

*I should not desire more, I have Jaime which is all I wanted. Our babe is a blessing. Months ago I would have given everything to have what I do right now. I just wish I could call him by name – tell every witness Jaime Lannister is my husband.*

Jaime was watching her face. He had angled his head up to stare at her. “I agree it should be soon.” His voice was deep, it called to her in fathomless stirring ways both familiar and unexplored. “My reasons are different to yours-” Freeing his left arm from beneath him, he inclined her chin so they were eye to eye. Cradling it from beneath, his thumb creeping higher to trace her bottom lip. “I don't want anyone thinking I felt obliged to marry you. To go drawing fallacious conclusions based off your pregnancy. They need to know it was indisputably a decision out of love. That I chose you – above all others.”

“Then let me go, the sooner I leave the sooner I'm back and yours completely, without any strings pulling me away.”

Jaime crawled up to her, their faces barely a whisker apart.
He took her in, inch by inch. Drinking in her vision before replying.

“After what you've told me tonight about the last time we parted, the cruel fate of our Winter baby at the hands of the Starks. You lie in my arms now, safe and sound, filled with our child. Do you think for one moment I am going to agree for you to go? I learn from my errors and mistakes. I do not repeat them. I protect what is mine.” Her future husband kissed her in the most beautiful and frustratingly possessive way.

“I'm sorry Brienne, I side with your Father. You must stay.”
Tempered

Chapter Summary

A follow on from last night's chapter giving us insight into Jaime's state of mind.

Chapter Notes

I love how this stay or go decision making is getting everyone talking! There is truly divided opinions.
I must say as I wrote it I feel both sides have a compelling argument.
This chapter is going to deal with the revenge/don't revenge debate.

*Crisp white snow crunched beneath his boots.*
The dreary walls of Winterfell rising to every side, enclosing him.
His hot breath puffed against the subzero air.
Lannister Crimson was his armour – a lion on the hunt.
Drawing Widow's Wail he waited.

The other predator appeared.
Swathed in dark woollen greys, a wolf pelt fashioning the neck of her cloak.
Flowing auburn hair and pallid skin.
Cold unfeeling eyes and bite in her words.
“So you've come to kill me?” She stalked him in circles, unfazed by his claws.
“Go ahead. Take your revenge. Show her your true nature. It won't bring your baby back.”
“You murdered our child.” He growled.
“Yes – and I'd do it again. One less Lannister in the world.” She smirked at him.
A challenge.

Another set of footsteps.
Her gown of deep burgundy velvet singed at the edges.
“Are you going to let her speak to you like that brother?” He turned his head to the familiar voice.
“Tell me you haven't grown so weak.” She cradled her protruding stomach, finally showing.
“You failed to protect our child, why should that sow expect any different?”
Her lips twisted into a snarl. “You left it to me to avenge Myrcella, you let Joffrey's killer slip away without pain. Are you a man?”

Jaime strode towards the she wolf. His veins a violent river of hatred.
The girl did not flinch. “I knew you would never uphold your vow to my Mother. You are a man without honour. I was right to cleanse her, put an end to your vile seed.”

*He swung the sword in a backward motion, thrusting it's butt into her abdomen, just as she'd ordered done to his woman.*
The Stark screamed in pain, falling to the snow.
Cowering away from him in fear, trembling, curling in on herself.
“Better...” His twin hissed. So close he could feel her lips on the shell of his ear. “Now finish her.”

He raised his blade.

“Jaime!” Her call echoed across the space between them, strong and even. He instinctively stepped towards her, away from his sister's clutches.

She wore her leathers but with a distinctive swell in front.

**Our babe of Spring...**

“Our babe of Spring....”

“Stop this!” She entreated him. “What of your vow?”

“She killed our baby!”

The red haired girl whimpered on the ground, reaching imploringly for her guard's ankle.

“Pathetic.” The other Lannister sneered, he could not tell to whom she referred.

“She has suffered enough.” Blue eyes. That tranquil calm he knew so well. “Make your peace.”

“Take your vengeance!” His sister screeched. “The lion does not care for the opinions of sheep!”

Safe behind the Lady Knight's legs, the wolf girl looked out from beneath her brows and smiled at him.

Jaime's blood reached boiling point. “She must die for what she has done!” He declared.

With a metallic scrape Oathkeeper barred his way.

He stared at her wide eyed.

“Honour compels me to fight for Sansa. To fight you.”

She pushed back against Widow's Wail.

She screamed, falling to the ground in the snow.

He had to get to her. The murderess could not escape.

With all his might he surged at Oathkeeper, its twin blade ringing as they clashed.

Ensuring he wasn't chasing her. “Brienne please! Don't let him hurt me.” She cried. “Please, he's just like Ramsay!”

His chance for retribution was escaping him again.

“Another loss brother?” His twin laughed. “You really are worthless.”

He furiously parried The Lady Knight's blows, transfixed upon the grey cloak receding into the distance.

Then a sickening squelch as Valyrian steel pierced leather and flesh.

He screamed, falling to the ground in the snow. Blood pouring from the slice through her stomach.

Pooling vermilion against the white snow.

He dropped the sword and fell to his knees.

“Brienne!” He screamed. The blood was flowing fast, wet and viscous.

He moved to touch her, she pulled away, his hands coming back stained.

“You couldn't make your peace.” She sobbed. “You couldn't keep your vows. Not for me. Not for our babe. I asked you to look to the future. To protect what we had. Now we've lost all.....”

She was fading, growing weaker.

“No!” He yelled, trying desperately to stem the bleeding.

His twin's shadow passed over them as she loomed above.

“Fool woman.” The former Queen taunted. “He will always be my creature. We crave our enemies destruction we lust for their blood.”

“I'm sorry.” He howled, bundling Brienne into his arms. “Please, I should have listened to you.
I'm so sorry.” It was too late. Her blue eyes dull. She was gone.
He threw back his head bellowing out his anguish in a deafening roar....

And he was in a cage. Tied to a pole.
Lady Catelyn stood over him.
Brienne behind.

The first time I ever saw her...
He was so happy to see her alive.
The point of a sword was lain on his heart -
“Swear that you will never take up arms against Stark nor Tully.
Swear that you will compel your brother to honour his pledge to return my daughters safe and unharmed. Swear on your honour as a knight, on your honour as a Lannister, on your honour as Brother of the Kingsguard. Swear it by your sister's life, and your father's, and your son's, by the old gods and new.....”
“I swear.” He said and he meant it.
The Lady of Tarth shook her blonde head. “He is a man without honour My Lady, you can believe nothing he says.”
She took the blade back from Lady Catelyn, raising it high.
“Please Brienne, I mean it, you can believe my word. I pledge it to you....”
Dour and expressionless she slashed the sword across his throat.

* * *

Perspiration dotted his flesh as he sat up in bed. His breath coming in ragged bursts.
The cloth of his undershirt clinging to his skin.
He threw back the covers and jumped from the bed, grappling with the curtains and ripping them aside to step out on the balcony.

Reacquainting himself with reality in the wake of his nightmare.
Feeling the fresh air. Hearing the rush of the ocean.
As he lifted his hand to his face he discovered that his sweat was mixed with salt tears.

“Jaime...” Brienne was behind him. “You were thrashing and crying out.”
He pulled her to him. “I'm sorry. You should have woken me, I could have hit you.”
“I tried, you could not be stirred. Whatever you were seeing had taken hold of you.”

He crossed to the marble railing, leaning against its coolness and looking out to sea.
“I have a confession to make.....As I was falling asleep I was plotting my vengeance against Sansa Stark.”
“It does not come as a shock.” She stood beside him. Propping herself up on an elbow. Her cotton shift swaying slightly in the breeze. “You never said you wouldn't.”

Brienne understood him better than anyone and she proved it with that simple observation.
“Even after all you explained? You still knew?”
“If you pointedly decide not to make me a promise. It is generally because you don't intend to keep it.” She sighed. “Or you just avoid the subject.”
“Well it will please you to know I've changed my mind.”
She looked at him skeptically.

“My path of blood and violence was always at the urging of Cersei. Her desperate need to hunt down enemies. To eliminate and destroy. Her influence on me was strong. You are different – with you I am kinder. More tolerant. You guide me to be a better person. I don't want to slip backwards.
Now - I'm not saying you would want to leave me alone in a room with Sansa but I'm not going to seek out reprisal. If you say you can overcome your anger, I will strive to do the same. I have to be wise enough to know that any acts of retribution could endanger what we have now.”

“When did you become so sensible?”

“Around the same time I slept with you. Maybe it rubbed off.”

She slapped his shoulder playfully. “Don’t complain to me about influence, I’m all over the place due to your offspring. Every unpleasant thing I do from now on, I’m holding you to blame.”

“It would seem then we’ve reversed roles.” He pressed his lips to her forehead. The haunting memories of the dream troubling him.

“Come inside.” She tugged on the front of his laces. “We need to get you out of that wet shirt.”

He wasn’t quite ready to walk it off. The all too real pain of failing her still snaring his heart.

“Brienne – I never want to lose you.”

She kissed his lips once softly in reassurance. “You're not going to.”
We have now passed chapter 50! :D
Exploring Bran's capabilities has been an interesting and time consuming task.
I was very determined once again to stick within the guidelines which canon has provided.
Therefore most information contained within this chapter is based from fact.
Of course I have added a few little tweaks. ;)

The Weirwood spread its bleached white branches, grasping endlessly at the sky.
Its bloodied leaves and rivers of sanguine sap leaking from its carved eyes reminding all witnesses that it was more alive than any human, seeing all and never forgetting.
Bran knew its roots stretched far into the soil below, tapping into the land's recesses of timeless memory.
And often events yet to come.

For the umpteenth time he cursed his own limited introduction.
The previous Three Eyed Raven's teachings cut bitterly short by a boy's impatience.
He had disrupted the chain for himself.
He was cautious never to repeat such a blunder.

Parked beneath the tree - the untapped source of his desired knowledge - he assessed his options once more.
The future was there to be seen, hanging frustratingly beyond his abilities reach.
It showed itself to him at its own will, breaking through when least expected.
Roaming the passages of fate was not an exact science. More an art form which manifested of its own volition.
Ever changing, shifting rapidly, weaving intricate and wild patterns.
He was the conduit for its tapestry.

The past was far more simple. The events already writ in darkened ink upon its neverending scroll. Available to be read, if you succeeded in mastering its navigation.
Pinpointing the precise moment which you wished to see.
The catch was knowing it existed, that it happened, when and where it took place.

Bran had forbade himself from entering the months surrounding his time at Winterfell.
Where the Night's King walked freely amongst the realms of men.
The only creature with the power to bring him down.
He did not know if revisiting those times could conjure the icy figure from the abyss.
If he misstepped by a day, a week, a moment. One touch could undo all that had been accomplished.
Transporting his adversary back into the here and now.
Were his fears founded? He had no way to tell. But it was not worth the risk.
Not even to sate his seething interest.
He had already accessed the easiest route. He had done that straight away.
Transporting himself through the pages of recent history and watching the Red Keep fall.
His mouth had twitched at the side when their exits were blocked. Relished the panic on their once confident faces.
An antidote to their zeal in a tower long ago.
Trapped forever underground. It would be their tomb.
If he could slow the instant the mortar rained down he would, savouring every impact.
Hoping their bones were splintering as his had.
How satisfying it would be if he could tune out the background noise to hear them snap like twigs.
But time was his to observe - not interfere.
He stood an invisible spectator until the dust had settled.
Staring at their final resting place. The cairn of bricks and justice.
The golden hand extruding from the rubble, his reassuring sign that it was over.

Or is it?

Bran had thought the Ravens would lay his concerns to rest.
After the words overheard at the Burrow's Well, he had sent them.
The idea of a one handed blonde man with noble carriage bound for Tarth niggling at his triumph.

Instead what had he uncovered?
A Lord far from feeble, stalking a sitting room instead of a death bed.
And his Raven had met its end.
Executed with a single practiced swing.
The flash of a Red and Black blade he recognised – His Father's sword's mutated scion.
Which should be here protecting him, if Oath's were truly for Keeping.
The more Bran analysed the more he interpreted.
The more he interpreted the more convinced he became....

Ser Brienne alone would carry that sword. She entrusted it to no-one.
It lived attached to her hip.
She was a seasoned fighter. Skilled with precision.
But -
Right Handed.

The cut which felled his bird - came from the left.
To whom would she endow her precious weapon?
Who used their left hand?

A split second of imagery to spawn so many fresh questions.
With one glaringly obvious answer.

He was denied the opportunity to rewatch the incident.
His visions extended as far as a Weirwood could see.
Their interconnected knowledge spread throughout the underground of the continent of Westeros, joined by infinite interlocking threads.
But this had taken place upon Tarth.
A separate land mass with its own history. Severed from the mainland by straits of blue water.
The island's saline soils inhospitable for the ancient trees.
Outside of the duristictions of his Greensight.

His Raven's were sent with regularity, only to be shot from the sky by arrows.
Their black figures hurtled to the oceans below, long before they even obtained a visual on the
archers.
It incited the King's determination that the Household had something to hide.

This left warging.
Upon Tarth's shores, there were only three people he knew by name.
Ser Brienne, Lord Selwyn and possibly Jaime Lannister.
Three options – none were viable.

Ser Brienne would be the easiest mark but it would also be detrimental to his aim.
Invading the mind of his Lady Commander could only serve to lose her protection once and for all.
Vegetation, retardation or death were the three most common side effects of a complete mind
takeover.
If he was wrong – he lost his sworn sword.
In a hallowed glimpse of his glorious reign, it had featured her as his guardian.
The exact scene taking place when she took her vows and swore herself to his Kings Guard.
Her physical strength to counter his weakness.
Marked for success if he were defended by the best warrior in Westeros.
He had hinted as much to her in the Godswood long ago.
That was after the intervention and disentanglement.
Prior to which there had been alternative visions, none favourable.
It reviled him to think she cared for the Kingslayer.
That one aspect of her he despised.
But she was played by the liar, she learnt her lesson.
She was filled with gratitude for being forgiven and exalted.
Or so he believed....

The Kingslayer. The Crippler.
Jaime Lannister.
Dead.
Or should be.
What were the consequences of trying to meld your mind with a dead man?
It gave him shivers.
Something about the concept screamed 'Night's King'.
If he knew beyond mere speculation that the man walked, Bran would not hesitate in enacting a
hostile takeover.
The pure pleasure of such a deed sent exhilaration spiralling through him.
The closest sensation to gratification his broken body could relish.
His powers had not been great enough previously.
But he dare not lose himself in the process.
To send one's mind on an unchartered course, seeking the consciousness of a long dead soul.
It sounded perilous.

Lord Selwyn.
Bran had never met the elderly man. Had never laid eyes upon him until the other day.
Now he knew his face but was once again foiled by distance and ocean.
He could not connect with such a weak link over the water.
He needed something solid, tangible to lock onto.

If the King was still of mortal temperament he would groan, or swear or lash out.
But he was not a man. He was the Three Eyed Raven.
And he would find a way.

So instead he sat.
Watching the Weirwood sway in the breeze.
Listening to the whispers of its rustling leaves.
An inscrutable smile on his face as he visualized his future successes.
The servants placed the final touches on the laden table. Silver spoons clinking against the delicate servingware.
Lord Selwyn nodded his approval and dismissed them with a wave.
He had invited his daughter to join him in breaking their fast in his solar.
The morning sun amplified by the glass windows turning the room delightfully toasty.
It helped to ease the ache in his bones.
Father and daughter had found themselves at cross purpose two evenings ago with forceful words being exchanged.
They had not spoken one on one since. Jaime had come to him the next day simply stating. “I told her I was taking your part.”
Selwyn had henceforth entrusted the matter to his capable hands. He hoped her future husband had succeeded in broaching the topic with her again and talking her around to their way of thinking.
From all observations Brienne and her betrothed suddenly seemed very enrapt in a world all of their own and Selwyn hadn't wanted to disrupt their peace.
Especially not if it kept both her feet firmly on Tarth's coast.

He hoped she understood that his resolute kybosh to her departure came from his paternal instinct to protect his only child.
It did not matter if she was six feet tall and could knock ten men into the dust.
She would always be his little girl.
The unnerving persona of this arcane King posing a threat to her safety which he must nullify.

The Evenstar sat in solitude as he awaited her arrival, pondering how he would mend the fences.
He had no intention of altering his position on the subject and he wondered how long it would take for the news of his Raven exodus and corresponding letter to reach her ears.
*If it hasn't already.*

He was startled by a disturbance just outside the room.
An unpleasant sound not dissimilar to someone heaving....
Lord Selwyn pushed himself out of his chair and ambled towards the door.

“Are you alright My Lady?” One of their housemaids hovered in concern, having produced a large container - generally used to carry water when scrubbing the floors.
Brienne was doubled over and retching uncontrollably into it.
Her Father's presence went unnoticed as she gripped the sides of the receptacle and took deep gulps of air between bouts.

“I apologise.” His daughter draped one arm around her stomach, placing the back of her hand to her mouth. “I will be fine.” Straightening she closed her eyes.

Lord Selwyn imagined she must be feeling quite ill and he fully comprehended why.....
Brienne stood with her eyes shut, willing the nausea away. As she had approached her Father's solar the plethora of food smells hit her like a pungent wall. She had barely been able to contain the vomit which propelled itself involuntarily up her throat. If a housemaid had not been passing, she hated to imagine the result.

“We will get this cleaned up.” The attendant removed the evidence and scampered out of sight. “Thank-you.” Brienne called after her, only then turning and becoming aware that she had company. Father. She instantly felt her cheeks flame red, awash with embarrassment that he had witnessed her morning sickness. There can be no concealing it now....

“Greetings Father.” She made herself walk, dreading the den of scent she was entering. He ushered her inside with an extended arm. “A fine day to you Brienne....”

Her eyes were knowing as she passed him, but he said nothing. She walked hastily to the nearest window, pushing it open before lowering herself in a chair. Hoping the fresh air would counteract the smothering aromas which were making her stomach roil. Lord Selwyn tinkled his small silver bell, summoning a servant. “Clear this away-” He gestured to the abundant fare. “-bring dry toast and ginger tea.”

The attendant looked bewildered. All their preparation for it to remain untouched. But he knew better than to question his liege. “Right away My Lord.”

Brienne guiltily watched them work. I should not have agreed to come. Only now she drew the parallel between here and the dining hall at Winterfell. There was something about the mixture of cooked eggs and greasy bacon that her unborn repelled. It was a shame – she quite liked those foods herself.

Her Father sank into the chair opposite and stared at her. She braced herself for the lecture and tried not to feel ashamed. He had seen four of his own children born – he would not be unknowledgeable of the symptoms of pregnancy.

They sat in silence as the servers brought a new tray with the requested items and made a hasty retreat.

She risked queasiness to inhale sharply. May as well get this over with....

“Father I know what you are about to say....”
“No, you don’t.” He shook his head gently. “Yes, I do - and I want you to know in advance I am sorry. I know this must be a disappointment. I am deeply apologetic for all the continued shame I bring upon you. Please know – it wasn't planned. Jaime and I both agree that to move the wedding forward in order to prevent the inevitable implications is the best course of action....” She trailed off. His disposition didn't match what she had predicted. It was almost sunny.

A caring and benevolent expression on his face as he beheld her. “Then, I am correct in my assumption. You are with child Brienne?”
“ Yes.”
He smiled. “I'm going to be a Grandfather.” Encouraging her towards the tray he advised. “The ginger tea will help settle your stomach. Here, nibble some toast as well if you feel up to it.”

She picked up the dry slice, barely masking her confusion. “You are not angry with me?”

The Evenstar shook his head kindly. “Daughter – I know my reticence throughout our years has lead to a canyon between us. So absorbed with what we believe is right, we often find ourselves in conflict. However in retrospect as a parent – which you will soon find out first hand – you come to
appreciate where exactly you could have improved....
When I raised you Brienne, I feared so much for what you would become.
I fretted over whether society would accept you and became determined to guide you onto the right
path. I did this in the only way I knew how – to try to find you a Lord husband and encourage you
to settle here.
Hoping you would find fulfillment in the calling of a conventional Lady.
But you had other plans, your fighting spirit equal to my own and you forged your own road
regardless of my efforts.”

The Lady Knight's shoulder's slumped as she reached for the brew. The spices hitting her nose in a
not unpleasant way. “I know I have been a trial. It was not my intention to cause you grief I just....”

“Brienne. Let your Father finish. I am trying to tell you that I have been remiss, in one of the
largest and most important aspects of my role.”
She raised her eyebrows in surprise as she took a sip. What can he possibly be referring to?

“Praise. I have never ceased urging you to reach higher, be stronger, uphold more morals. When I
should have paused long enough to let you know how much I commend the woman you've
become....”

Lord Selwyn looked her square in the eye. “I'm proud of you Brienne. I could not be prouder if you
were a son. I could not be prouder if you were the fairest maid in all the lands.
You are inspirational. A pioneer, a tower of strength and fortitude. You live by an impossibly high
code, you love with all your being and you embody everything I could ever hope a child of mine
would and more.”

Her bottom lip began to quiver, she had spent her whole life thinking herself the greatest
disappointment to him.
“I love you daughter. I know I don’t tell you often enough. And your man – that person whom
everybody else wrote off as a lost cause – he adores you as well. You have the love and respect of
your future Lord Husband. The admiration and pride of your Father. A page in the books of history
for all your accomplishments. And soon you will add motherhood to that list. A future generation.
An heir to Tarth. I cannot possibly be upset with you for that. You are everything a Father could
hope for and more.”

“Thank you.” She held in the tears, refusing to let her hormones win again. “You have no idea how
much that means to me.”

“I think I might.”

He pushed himself up and she placed her cup aside hurriedly. “Don’t strain on my account!”
“Nonsense. If I cannot muster the energy to hug my daughter when she has just told me life-
changing news, what use do I serve?”
She stood as he walked over and embraced her tightly.
“Congratulations Daughter. To you and Jaime both. You will make wonderful Evenstars.”
She could not believe what she was hearing.
Her whole life she had sought his approval only to fall short.
Now she finally had it. Her happiness was bursting at the seams.

He pulled away and clapped her on the shoulder. “Now back to work. We have a wedding to finish
planning and far more limited time to accomplish it.”
“Of course.” She nodded. “I appreciate the tea, it helped.”

“Your mother would drink it during her first few months. Glad I haven’t forgotten the important
things.”

They both reclaimed their seats.
Brienne smirked affectionately at the obstinate old man. They were so similar.
There was still something he had purposefully neglected to mention....

“I know about the Ravens.” She informed him. “And the letter.....honestly Father did you have to contact the King without consulting me?”

His blue eyes challenged her own in response, eternally steadfast. “A wise woman once told me that nothing is more hateful than failing to protect the one you love.”
Thousands of lights winked in the vast city below. Plunged into darkness but for the glow emitted from candles placed upon windowsills and lanterns lit along the sidewalks. Breaking the pitch black solitude.

A raven cawed in the distance. The King listened.

In his human form he could not see his winged messenger, but he sensed its presence.

Patiently he sat. Errant gusts guttering the torches lining the terrifying drop of the Terrace.

Ser Podrick glanced nervously at them as he walked the perimeter, keeping his distance.

Ordinarily Bran would have retreated inside by this hour.

“Shall I return you to your chambers your Grace?”

“Just a few minutes more....”

The fires spat and crackled. Time as if suspended.

It made his Guard uneasy. The Three Eyed Raven knew better.

*This night is just beginning.*

The panting of someone out of breath approaching from behind.

Payne's acknowledgment of the arrival. “Maester Tarly.”

“Ser Podrick, may I approach?”

He watched the Knight nod his approval.

“This message arrived for you Your Grace. It is from Tarth. Would you like me to read it?”

The King did not turn his head. “Pass it to me.” He held out his hand.

Eyes unmoving from the vacant beyond.

The parchment felt brittle against his fingers. “Thank you Sam. You may go.”

The Maester bowed and toddled off.

Lifting it to the limited brightness, Bran broke the wax seal.

Scanning its contents to the end.

He did not read it. He only need see the signature.

Muscles spasmed at the corners of his mouth before regaining their neutrality.

His wait had been worthwhile.

“Ser Podrick....remain by the door. I will be out here a while longer....”

* * *

Jaime bustled down the hallways, a mischievous smirk illuminating his features.

His future wife had been floating on air this morning after the validating words imparted by her Father. To see her so alight was infectious.

Whenever he glanced her way he marvelled at the glow of expectant motherhood, becoming overwhelmed with pride and sentiment.

This just made her scoff at him. “Radiant am I? Just what the maid must have been thinking when she cleaned out my sick pail. The men in my life have gone mad.”

He had pecked her on the cheek. “Not so mad as to want to kiss you after you have been retching.”

The Knight made his excuses to her, covering his whereabouts for the day. He claimed to have
promised himself to his pint-sized friends at the practise yard. A ruse they were happy to assist him with – for a price. Jaime couldn't help thinking that if they extorted any more coppers out of him for skipping sessions he would soon require a loan from the Iron Bank. And he needed his coin....

Since finding out he was going to be a Father – in the fully fledged, true acknowledged sense - he had longed to roam the docks, visiting with passing merchants and exploring their wares. His time spent as a trader had taught him that ships carried all sorts of curiosities from far and wide. Jaime wanted to prepare a surprise for his wench.

He knew she did not feel like herself and that it must be disconcerting for someone as composed and dignified as Brienne. He needed her to know how much he appreciated her sacrifice. Prior to her announcement he had already noted a change in her behaviour. The most prominent being a hesitancy towards sparring. Now he understood the reason why - her protective instinct had already kicked in. He realised she suffered guilt from the loss of her first pregnancy. That she would do everything in her power to ensure this child was carried to term. It was difficult to watch her internal battle as she stared yearningly at Oathkeeper in its scabbard. A part of herself she was denying. He wanted to tell her it would be alright but didn't want to commit himself to such guarantees. So instead he devised distraction – assembling a keepsake to mark the beginning of her new journey.

Finally, an hour or so after sundown, his preparations were complete – the carved wooden box tucked securely beneath his arm. “Selwyn! I will be just down the corridor. Can you please send Brienne in when she looks for me? And come find us if you need our input.”

The Evenstar looked up from his wedding plans – he took this particular responsibility very seriously. Arching one bushy eyebrow he hesitantly enquired. “Would I be wise to interrupt?”

Jaime chortled. “We restrict our more stimulating activities to the bedroom Grandfather to be. Just don't hold me to my word if the door is closed.” He had learnt he could now tease the old man, getting away with much more since he was to be family. “Be off with you.”

“Is that all the reaction I get?” He had been at least hoping for one of those trademark Tarth glowers of disapproval.

Selwyn did not deign to respond – though Jaime was relatively sure he heard him huff. Well, that is going to have to do.

* * *

“Father – do you know where Jaime is? He has been up to something all day. It's unnerving.”

The Lady Knight crossed the threshold to her Father's meeting room, leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed.

“He is down the hall.....” The Evenstar was manifestly preoccupied. “....are you cloaking Jaime or is he cloaking you?”

“In truth I have no idea. Duncan Bluestone hardly has a House to represent.” She scuffed her boot against the floorboards.

“If you are remaining a Tarth then perhaps he should remove your KingsGuard Cloak – that would be quite ceremonious.”

She frowned. “And somewhat outrageous. Flaunting my dereliction of duty.”

“Brienne.....now that I am aware you serve a King of Darkness and Ravens, your removal from protecting his questionable reign should be celebrated. Tell me, do you favour rose or blue?”

“Jaime likes me in blue....”

“Good that was my preference.”
“But I'd like to incorporate more red.”
He looked up at her in question. Crimson didn't seem like her predilection. She was going to have to explain. “It is in our colours and I'd like to pay homage to who he truly is.”
“That's a precarious move to make daughter.”
“I know. It is necessity alone which prevents me. I'm not ashamed to be marrying Jaime Lannister.”
“The situation is bothering you isn't it?”

Brienne looked down and placed a hand upon her stomach. “I have no right to complain.”
“Your child has made you ponder it more though.”
She sighed. “I know it is bothering him as well. He hinted as much to me and that was before I told him about the baby. The Lannisters were one of the most powerful and influential families Westeros has ever seen. Their lineage appears to be dying out but we know better. Once Jaime and I marry in the sight of the Gods, this baby will become a true born heir to the Westerlands. Yet here we sit discussing cloaking him in our family colours. We are a vassal house, they are lieges, if the truth were known it would dwarf our claims.”

“Not to be in poor taste but you just reminded me....doesn't he have a younger brother?”
“Yes, however he is not aware that Jaime is alive.”
“Whyever not? Did they quarrel?”
“No but Lord Tyrion was instrumental in King Bran's ascension to the throne.”
“Hmmmmm. That does present a complication. Ask your future Lord Husband about it for me. It does seem sad that he will have no family present.”
“Just be thankful it is Tyrion who remains.” She remarked wryly. “The rest of the family you wouldn't be so keen to invite.” Brienne couldn't resist a sly smile as she read further into her father's queries. “You've taken a shine to him haven't you?”

Lord Selwyn pretended not to have heard. “Beg pardon?”
“My Jaime. You weren't fond of him at first, he's told me. But – he grows on you doesn't he? You may have a son in a sense afterall.”
“He has a way about him which may be endearing....” The Evenstar conceded. “....if it weren't so terribly uncouth. He was in here before, trying to get a reaction out of me by making indecorous comments.”
“And what did I teach you?”
“Ignore him otherwise it only serves to encourage.”
She smiled. Glad I could spare Father that learning curve.

Lord Selwyn exhaled. “You are correct. Against all odds - I like him Brienne. Just don't tell him that. It makes me less intimidating and he needs to be kept in line.”
“I will keep your secret.” Brienne countered. “If you don't reveal that I told you to remain impassive. I know it drives him insane.”
“Consider it done.”
She could tell he was keen to return to his arrangements. “Now we have that sorted, I best go see what my betrothed has in store for me.....”

* * *

A blue cloak, a red cloak....
Selwyn tossed around his own ideas following the conversation with his daughter. Quill dipped in ink, poised at the ready.

He could sense that Brienne was saddened having to marry a stranger in name instead of her lion Lord.
She wanted her child to be claimed. Her husband acknowledged.

*In an ideal world they could cloak each other as evenly represented partners.*

*His of red, hers of blue then they could swap. That would epitomise their mutual esteem and regard for each other.*

He wrote notes for his own amusement.

This gave rise to further inspiration.
He sketched the outline of the sigil of House Tarth.

*Once we were Kings in our own right, traceable back to the Dawn of Days.*

*The Lannister's of the Rock date their heritage back to Lann the Clever and the Age of Heroes. Both mighty ancestries of noble blood intermingle in this new generation....*

Quartering their banner as he had been taught as a youngster, many, many years ago, he filled in the crescent moons, imagining them in blue. He then substituted the sunbursts against rose red for golden lions.

It was so simple, seamless and perfect. Barely even an adjustment. *Perhaps they were preordained...*

*Boisterous laughter drifted from down the hall. Even without the word's Selwyn could differentiate the muffled sounds of Jaime's theatrics and Brienne's mirth. He could not recollect a time even in her childhood when she had been so open and joyous.*

*If only I had thought to look at sigils, I would perhaps have found her match for her.....* The Evenstar chuckled to himself at the inane thought. *But truly never would I have imagined Jaime Lannister was the answer - how life twists and turns.*

He jotted down his approval of the combined design. He would show Brienne, even if it were just fantasy.

Maybe it would please her to know that he had created a crest for his Grandchild....

The pressure came out of nowhere.
A crushing vice tight grip resonating from deep within his mind.
Building, intensifying.
Constricting his brain, freezing him in place.

Pain – hot and cold simultaneously.
The expansion of the tension, a searing eruption in the making, certain at any moment his skull would reach capacity and implode.

All whilst an icy terrifying presence sunk beneath his skin.
Hearing disappeared – replaced by a keening high pitched ringing.
It's persistent wail drowning out coherent thoughts.

*Shout – I must warn them.*
The instructions no longer reached his tongue.

*Move.*

His body was unresponsive.
Each failed command to his anatomy unleashed a wave of piercing needles through his gray matter.
The chill was settling in, the stranger taking control.
He was the foreign one now, the outsider in his own flesh.

*No – it's my body. I will not surrender.*
He pushed back against the force....

Sight was the last sense to disappear.
Thrust into infinite blackness.
Isolated to a small insignificant space of semi-consciousness.
Trapped with no escape.
Shrinking further into obsoletion.
Fatalistic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_His spirit is strong – but his physique weak._
Opaque white eyes peered from Lord Selwyn's face.
His expression blank.
Lacking its customary vigour and warmth.

Aged hands gripped the desk edge for leverage, hoisting himself to his feet.
_Fraider than appearances suggested. An element of truth. He hides it well._
The parchments on the tabletop fluttered in the breath of air generated by his movements.
The King assessed them with a brisk scan. The image of Golden Lions interbred with Crescent Moons catching his eye.
_Treachery...._

Raucous laughter reached his ears.
Resounding from a few doors away by his assessment.
The tones male and female.

_Walk._
The effort was monumental - the withered body had already been unwilling to respond at the hands of its former master.
He usually chose more agile hosts.
_this is going to take skill..._

Lurking in shadow, he clung to the walls and inched towards the activity.
Each burst of animated chatter providing the incentive to amble on.
Obscured behind the doorframe the possessed figure edged closer.
Lowering unobtrusively around its perimeter.
This was the answer he had been waiting for....

The hearth kindled with a cozy blaze.
A platter sat upon a small table, from which an assortment of morsels had been shared.
Two goblets were placed beside it.
Within arms length, a chaise lounge stretched diagonally across the room. It's placement completely without nuance, as if it had been recently moved from its usual position.

The Lady Commander rested on one end, her back nestled firmly in the crook of the chair.
One leg tucked beneath her whilst the other extended leisurely along the distance of the cushioned surface. She was all rosy cheeks and merriment. The striking opposite to the refined taciturn woman she portrayed to the outside world. She smiled broadly at her companion - casually perched opposite her was the Kingslayer.

Bran riled at the sight of him. _Living and thriving._
All easy grins and flirtatious banter as he pressed himself closely against Brienne's outstretched leg. They sat face to face, less than a foot apart and he needn't concern himself with being noticed, for they were completely engrossed in each other's company. The only thing which seperated them was a wooden box, sitting on the padded seat between them.

The Crippler spoke. "Go again!"
“I'm not sure I'm game.”
“You know you want to.....shut your eyes.” He cracked open the lid and Brienne inserted her hand.
“What did you find?”
She withdrew a small music box. “Alright, this one has me baffled...”
“Don't ask me – I'm stumped.” Jaime brandished his right arm with a grin.
She rolled her large blue eyes. “That is just terrible. You know I cannot drink and to find that jape
would require large quantities of wine.” Regardless of her assertion she chuckled.
The Lannister raised his eyebrows playfully giving her thigh a nudge.
Cautiously she began to turn the handle, causing the cylinder to slowly rotate.
The tune began to play....so familiar even Bran could recognise it.
The Bear and the Maiden Fair.

“That's not funny!” Despite this she was laughing.
“Yes it is. But it's missing this.” Conspiratorially concealing the contents of the box, the
Kingslayer produced another item from within. A sizeable wooden carving of an angry bear.
The Three Eyed Raven did not understand the significance of these items but clearly Brienne did.

“I suppose that first gift now makes sense....where is the offensive thing?”
“I believe you threw it at me.” He searched the floor, retrieving a sewn floppy doll in a pink lacy
dress. “Here you go – remember you have to add her hair. I think blonde and short.”
She took the effigy from him, holding it between two fingers as though it were diseased.
“Sometimes I don't know why I put up with you.”

The statement would have been a positive to Bran's ears had it not exuded affection.
The sickening adoration behind her gaze enough to make him queasy.
He does not deserve such devotion.

Jaime did not leave him wondering for long.
Tenderly parting their kiss only to plant another on her abdomen, he murmured, “I cannot wait
until you can hear me.”
Brienne ruffled his hair lovingly. “I'm sure our little one is looking forward to meeting its Father
too.”
Again.
Adrenaline soaked fury made blood rush in the ears of his vessel.
*She carries his seed again.*
The faintest hint which remained of the original spirit made a tug for control of the brain.
Beseeking Bran to leave them be.

If he were still a Wolf – a creature of impulse with no discretion or forethought, he would attack then and there.
Even if he became a Raven, his feathers would still have ruffled, taking flight to peck their eyes from their sockets.
But a crippled boy had come to know the subtle art of torment.
How it felt to live without something you once cherished.

Revenge was a dish best served cold.
He would not make this easy.
He could play games too.
When it came to his antagonist and his mate – there were crueler punishments to be meted out than violence.

*Starting now.*

* * *

Jaime jerked his head up. Straightening at the sudden thump from the hall.
Brienne bristled beside him. She had heard it too.
They exchanged apprehensive glances before moving in unison.
Warriors intuition palpably charged.

His Lady Knight was two steps ahead of him due to her long strides.
“Father?” Her voice was fretful.
Filled with dread Jaime followed her line of vision, seeing the fingertips of an elderly hand lying just beyond the doorway. He grabbed her by the arm, intending to hold her back until he could investigate - but Brienne couldn't be stopped.
She covered the distance in shaky bounds, her betrothed following right at her heels.

Jaime knew her findings from her grief-stricken cry, as she fell to her knees upon the carpet.
Stepping up behind her, he gave her shoulder a squeeze.
Suppressing his own sorrow to look upon his good-father.
Selwyn lay fallen at a disturbing angle, as if dropped from standing upright.
Extinguished in the blink of an eye.
Blood trickled from his ear, another trail of carmine dripping from his nostril.
His eyes were fixed and dilated, widened as if in fear.
He was gone.

The former lion crouched beside Father and Daughter, Brienne's body spasming with inconsolable sobs.
He released her shuddering shoulder to lean forward and close the kind man's eyes.
His skin still felt warm to the touch. *It has only just happened.*
The Evenstar had slipped from this life alone, only a few paces from those he loved most.

Swallowing past the forming lump in his throat, Jaime choked back tears.
It would not do to crumble – Brienne needed him.
Sitting on the floor he pulled his woman to him, enveloping her in his arms as she wept.
“I'm so sorry.” He kissed her forehead, his heart breaking with every heave of her chest.
Jaime hated seeing her in pain and there was not a thing to be done to quell this ache. All he could do is hold her. “Brienne, I'm so sorry.” A tear of his own rolled down his cheek. He had loved Selwyn too. For the briefest shining moment they had been a family. So they sat there, beside him in the hall, until long after the fires burnt down to embers and ash. The three of them together for the last time.

Chapter End Notes

And I'm so sorry. :( This made me so sad, but it is Game of Thrones.
I just wanted to say a big thank you once again to anyone who is reading this!
I can't believe how far we've come and I'm floating on cloud nine.
I appreciate every comment from the bottom of my heart. :)

“Brienne – everything is ready. The smallfolk are currently paying their respects.” Jaime kept his voice low as he entered their bedchamber. Everything had been said in hushed tones for the past couple of days. That or reserved silence. His woman herself had scarcely spoken a word, only replying when he asked her a direct question. Preferring to nod or gesture instead of articulating.

Her hands trembled as she attempted to fasten her swordbelt, Jaime hastily bridging the distance between them to hold the buckle steady.
One handed it the was all the assistance he could offer.
“Thank you.” She whispered.
He wrapped both arms around her tightly, pressing a chaste kiss to her temple.
The Lady Knight closed her eyes, leaning into his touch. Jaime could see the traces of dried rivers upon her cheeks.
“If you are here, who is with Father?” Her voice was hoarse, thick with despondency.

“Andrew wanted to take over, if I was relieved we could prepare for the service together.”
Releasing Brienne he removed his surcoat, very ready for a change of attire. “Is that alright?”
She nodded, sitting listlessly on the side of the bed.

The time since her Father's passing had been a trial Jaime was ill prepared to handle.
His usually resolute and poised life partner, pulled under by a tide of grief.
Navigating through her pain alongside his own sadness, proved a complex juggling act of custom, emotion and common sense.

On the first morning, she had cried herself sick.
When the beams of dawn's light heralded the beginning of new day, Jaime had known it was time.
He had prised himself from her grasp, picking them both up from the floor beside Selwyn.
Instructing Brienne that she must tell the people – it was her duty as Evenstar now.
The realisation had caused her a fresh flood of devastation, rendering her unable to form the required sentences. She had run for the privvy, vomiting uncontrollably whilst tears streaked down her face.
He had tried to calm her, rubbing her back and speaking words of empathy.
Reminding her he lost his own Father and that he would always feel partly to blame, although they were never close. Letting her know that he had come to love Selwyn as if he were his own sire.
Telling her how he knew her Father wouldn't want her to be so stricken.
Eventually her stomach was empty and her face was ashen. Stripped of all colour and energy.
Yet she managed to compose herself long enough to perform her obligations.
Making the necessary announcements and beginning funeral arrangements.

That was when he really encountered problems.
Brienne hadn't slept and she wouldn't touch food - maintaining she would be unable to keep it
down anyhow. Her despair was deep and the one thing that seemed to awaken her inherent fighting spirit was a staunch determination to stand vigil for her Father.

“Ser Jaime I am a Knight, you will not curb me nor tell me what I can and cannot do.” Her tone had been sharpened steel as she assumed her position by the bier.
The perfect example of a stalwart sentinel – albeit a pregnant one.

“Brienne I will do it...” He had pleaded with her. “You are tired, you need a meal and to rest.”

“I am not a weak woman! I am his only child. I will stand here for him.” A large droplet of salt water had cascaded down her cheek but she remained otherwise expressionless as she stared at her Father's form, laid in state before the alter. That was when she stopped talking.

Jaime stayed by her side the entire time. Holding a secondary vigil of his own.
In equal parts for his good Father and future wife.
Every hour his protests became louder. Imploring her to take a break, eat, nap - anything.
Threatening to remove her by force for being so ridiculously stubborn.
She did not even acknowledge him.

Eventually she began to sway, her legs buckling involuntarily.
Jaime had caught her before she could fall. They exchanged knowing looks and bleary eyed she conceded to his wishes with a nod.
He had kissed her forehead. “Think of our baby. The next generation comes first. I will stay with him tonight Brienne, I promise.”
He had two attendants escort her back to their chambers.

They had taken the vigil in turns from there on in.
Sometimes crossing over so they could both stand guard. One to either end.
The prayers of those who came to pay their respects both touching and heartbreaking.
Lord Selwyn had been much loved, it was evident in life and death.
Now having changed and freshened it was time to bid their final goodbye.
Jaime had chosen his blue Castellan garb, honouring the role Selwyn had entrusted him with.
Brienne appraised his appearance with a quick glance up and down.
“Do you approve of my choice?” He enquired.
“You forget – I am still of the Kingsguard. I have surrendered my claim to my home. Evenfall Hall is under your command now. Therefore it is befitting.”
“You are the Evenstar Brienne.” He reassured her, he would not hear any different.
“In this moment, I am naught but a grieving Daughter.”

Opening his arms in invitation, she consented to another embrace.
The last comfort he could offer her before they were on display. “It does not feel like it now, but you shall smile again. I know this has been harrowing, but your Father wanted us to be happy. Please do not let this sorrow drown your light.”
His Lady gazed at him, her blue eyes familiar and wise. “It is wicked of me to admit but although I am currently experiencing much pain – I do know it shall pass. I have a lot to live for Jaime. I still have you.” She rubbed her cheek against his own. “I lost you to death once. There can be no comparison to a heartbreak such as that. Even now in the grips of woe, I remember.”

Jaime knew they would find comfort in each others arms in bed that night. He would look forward to her closeness, the fond thought becoming a beacon to guide him through the remainder of this miserable day. They had slept apart the previous evenings due to their shifts. The absence of her warm body beside him only amplifying his sense of sadness.

* * *

Just a few hours more.....
“Father above, judge Lord Selwyn Tarth justly.....” The Septon intoned the concluding prayer of the service. Brienne stood stoically upon the beach, gusty wind whipping her hair. Jaime – or Duncan as he must be at present – directly next to her.

She held in her sobs, slowly breathing, her chest rising and falling dramatically with the effort of it. Imagining that her air of calm would quieten any upset which she unwillingly imposed on her babe within.

The people of Tarth crowded upon the surrounding sands to say their farewells. Though the guards kept them at a safe distance, she would not have them driven back. They had been born and raised on this island, under the constant watchful care of her Father. Most had known him their entire lives, in some instances multiple generations. They deserved to be here.

“May the Lantern of the Crone guide him on this, his ultimate voyage....”

She felt the soft strokes of Jaime's thumb, teasing open her clenched fist. She looked at him in question, with so many witnesses should she dare openly display their affection? He simply shrugged. The locals knew they were soon to be married – why deprive herself this small solace?

Opening her large hand, she felt his fingers twine with hers. Jaime was her constant support. In good times and in bad. She appreciated him so much it ached. Every so often he glanced her way, checking to see if she was alright. His eyes were watery with unshed tears and her heart swelled to know how much her Father had meant to him.

“....where he will be welcomed to the far sweet land of the Seven Heavens. Invited to laugh and feast until the end of days in the Father's Golden Hall.”

She knew that was the cue. Stepping forward she bent and kissed her Father on the forehead. He lay upon the raft, as dignified in death as he was in life. Clasping a greatsword and shrouded in the sigil of their house. Though sadly, the painted stones were a poor substitute for his generous blue eyes. Tears temporarily blinded her vision. Her bottom lip trembled but she retained control.

Brienne felt Jaime's right arm at the small of her back. He leant down, placing his hand respectfully on Selwyn's shoulder, shutting his eyes tightly. Saying goodbye. When he opened them again he nodded to her and they both returned to their positions.

A retinue of the Evenstar's most trusted guards filed down the beach in two lines. Lifting the raft from the sand and placing it upon their shoulders. They then waded into the outgoing tide. Funeral customs were always timed this way on Tarth, at the discretion of the ebb and flow of the Straits.

As they set his vessel afloat upon the ocean, silence stretched throughout the crowd. Every last man, woman and child bowing their head in respect. As he began to drift slowly out to sea, it was Brienne's responsibility to give the order. Lifting her head, she turned to Andrew and solemnly nodded. A signal was issued to the archers on the ramparts above.

She slowly released the breath she'd been holding as Jaime reclaimed her hand. A stunning display of flaming arrows fanned out from the ramparts. Taking flight from evenly
spaced origins, choreographed in a mesmerising dance. Trailing their orange blaze, like a sky full of shooting stars. Their bursts echoing their banners, contrasting against the azure of the sky. With perfect precision they converged in the middle, descending in unison to set the raft aflame. Jaime watched transfixed. Even she had to admit there was a haunting beauty in the ritual. Even if it took her Father away from her forevermore.

Out of her peripheral vision, another vessel on the water caught her eye. It sailed towards their shores, growing gradually closer. Brienne recognised the Raven standard's emblazoned on the sails as they billowed in the wind. It was the same ship which brought her here, returned to claim her back for King's Landing. Though her first and only thought was to protect her betrothed.

She dug her nails into Jaime's hand, catching his attention before shooting her eyes in the boat's direction. The blood drained from his face as he realised what was happening.

“Return inside the stronghold.” She commanded through gritted teeth. “Take the back stairs, the way I showed you, near our tidal pool.”
“T'm not going to leave you alone to face them.” He hissed back.
“Do it, now!” The Lady Knight mouthed at him. “I will NOT lose you as well.”
This was enough to convince him. The lion whispered in her ear. “If you are not back in our chambers within the hour – I bring the garrison.”
She nodded her agreement. Jaime turned and disappeared into the crowd.
Reversal

Chapter Summary

We pick up where we left off with the arrival of the ship which Bran sent to Tarth back at the end of 'Flight'.

Chapter Notes

Some things come full circle -
Sometimes roles are reversed. :)

Brienne took her first step upon the newly refurbished pier. Planting both feet firmly upon the timber then moving no further. Her positioning tactically assumed to convey a misleading welcome. She clasped her hands in front, preventing herself from reaching for Oathkeeper in its scabbard. Only then registering that the action concealed her engagement ring from view. She knew it was pivotal to maintain the image that Tarth was an ally to the crown.

The galley threw its ropes from the deck as the dockhands scrambled to assist. Securing the familiar ship to the posts. The last time she had boarded the vessel, it was with a sense of freedom. Now it had come to affect the very opposite.

Many of the onlookers from the beach had followed her here. Noticing the peculiar timing of the arrival. Brienne was certain they only thought it innocent. Most likely presuming an envoy had come to pay their respects on behalf of the King. She knew better. They had sent him no word of her Father's passing.

Andrew and Wesley stood behind her, tense and alert. The Lady Knight strongly suspected that their Captain of the Guard was more astute than he let on. “My Lady – are we to welcome them ashore?” He enquired hesitantly.
Her tone was measured but low. “Let us first see what tidings they bring.”
It is only one ship. She reassured herself. If it was to be war, he would have sent an army.
She scanned the horizon for indicators of a fleet - the sea was choppy, dotted by whitecaps but otherwise clear.

Turning her attention to the vessel in front of her, she counted the crew. It was the same number as when she had previously travelled, their faces familiar. This she could turn to her advantage. Though their countenance was noticeably more stern, with little communication as they went about their work.

A flesh and blood Raven cawed from one of the masts above, taking wing into the air. This troubled her, they had gone to great lengths to eliminate the spies. A small impertinent voice drifted from behind. “Father what's going on?” “Go back to your mother at once!” Andrew reprimanded.

An idea bloomed.
“No – it is alright.” Brienne did not shift her gaze from the end of the dock. “Nessa - fetch the boys. I have a task for you. I need you to tell Ser Duncan to stay inside, he must instruct the staff to close all open doors and windows. Then you and the others are to spread out across the grounds and watch for that Raven. If you find it – inform the archers. I will see you all rewarded when this is done.”

She knew the spirited girl must have looked to her Father for permission. “Do as your Lady commands.”

“I will not fail you Ser.” Her excitement was tangible as she scampered off. 
*She alone addresses me by my correct title.*

The Captain of the ship disembarked. Striding towards them purposefully. His smile was tight, disingenuous and his bow was shallow. 
*“Lady Commander.”*

*“Captain - what fortuitous timing this is.”*

*“Indeed. We chanced to sight a burning raft upon our approach. I trust all is well?”*

*“Sadly far from it. My Father has passed out of this world. Your arrival had interrupted his funeral proceedings, so pray forgive us if you find your welcome less hospitable than previously. We are a land in mourning.”*

*“My sincerest condolences.” She did not feel any of the meaning behind his words. Brienne soon learnt why.*

*I am sent here on the orders of King Bran the Broken. You are to return with us to King's Landing immediately.*

Silently fuming at the man's disrespect she straighted to her encompass her full height, raising her chin imposingly. 
*“Did you not hear what I just relayed?” Her voice was clipped and brusque. “The smoke from my Father's cremation still lingers in the air and you expect me to leave at this very moment?”*

*“As the King commands, we obey.”*

*“Surely his Grace could not know of the circumstances when he issued this summons? Therefore some leniency is most definitely in order. Rest your crew, my guards will show you to suitable accomodation.”*

*“We are not to make port, our instructions are quite specific. We arrive, collect you and depart within the hour.”*

*I'm going to require a different tact.*

Brienne softened her tone. “Captain, can you not understand that I am grieving? I just bid my dear Lord Father farewell. Of course, I intended this very evening after his funeral feast to board a ship and make my own way back to the service of his Grace. I take my duties to the Crown as Lady Commander very seriously. Your sudden arrival although well timed is also very inconvenient. I have much to arrange here, all affairs must be in order and I have not yet collected my things. I would ask - as we both agree that I must depart – for a few hours in order to achieve what I intended. A favourable gale blows this afternoon, it will be easy to make up for the lost time once we set sail.”

The Captain huffed, scanning the shoreline. He knew they were outnumbered.
*“We embark at dusk.”*

* * *

“No. Kill them. Send Bran back their heads in a box. Seven Hells Brienne! This is ridiculous!”

Jaime tore around their quarters in a rage.

“They are just messengers Jaime. That would be unjust. They are following orders. Besides this is our last opportunity to broker my dismissal peacefully.”
“You cannot be serious? Look what has unfolded!"
“What exactly has been done?! The King sent a flock of Ravens to investigate. Perhaps he doubted my Father's health or was just curious. I had been gone a long time without sending word. Either way, it was us who slaughtered them on mass as if we have something to hide – which we do. It was my Father who sent a letter chastising his sovereign. We are lucky he did not send an armada!”
“Instead he sent a boat to collect you. As though you are his property.”
“My life is sworn to his service Jaime, whether we like it or not. His actions are not out of line. I have a chance now to regain my credibility which will be intrinsic when I make my plea.”
“How do you figure?” He was perplexed.

The Lady Knight took a deep breath. “My Father did not look ill. It made me seem a liar. His sudden passing reinstates that I spoke honestly. If I leave with them now, without fuss, all is exactly as it appeared.”
“And the dead birds?”
“I can explain that away. I will say it was Father's doing for in truth it was.”

“There is something dark at work here Brienne. I felt it in Winterfell and I feel it still. I do not trust that boy, man, Three Eyed cretin – whatever he is. You take people at face value all too easily.”
“I have said it before and I will say it again. As far as I can see, he has done us no direct harm.”
“How did your Father die?”
“What?” She paled at his insensitive question. “You were there – you saw everything, exactly the same as I did.”
“He was quite well when I left him and when you last saw him. Maester Bextor was unable to explain his cause of death.”
“It can be quite difficult to determine. He did have his theories - something to do with his brain. Father was old Jaime, his health had been deteriorating for quite a while. We both know this.”
“But his brain seemed like the sharpest organ he had left. No senility. Fully functioning....”
“Don't do this. I have enough on my plate without you looking for daggers in every shadow again. Paranoia does not become you Jaime, nor did it your sister.”

He flinched, wounded. She regretted the words the instant she said them. It hadn't been her intention to be so harsh. She had just wanted to make him stop filling her head with doubts. She had enough of her own, without his additions.
“I'm sorry. Forgive me. Do you really think, this is what I want?”
Slumping onto their bed, she held her head in her hands. “I miss my Father. I'm tired. I feel ill. I dread returning to King's Landing, it is a viper's nest I cannot negotiate. I have little self control over my emotions or my mouth – I just lashed out at you, when I didn't even mean to. I'm scared for our baby, constantly. I can't lose this one too....”
Jaime sank onto the covers beside her, putting a protective arm around her shoulders.
“....I don't want to part from you again. The last time we said goodbye nearly broke me. I am sick of pretending, denying my heart. Lying and scheming. I have this impending sense of dread whenever I am with the King and I do not need you to be inflammatory to it. You know I wear my thoughts plainly Jaime, deception is not my forte. I am afraid to ask for what I want because our entire future rests upon the answer. I need to believe that this will turn out favourably. I must have confidence in Bran.”

“We can leave this all.” He crooned into her ear. “Sail away into a different life. Set ourselves up in some exotic land and forget all these Westerosi cunts ever existed.”
“Is that the future you want for us and our baby? If so, we could have set our course back at Winterfell.” Calling him out when he was speaking falsely was an innate gift of hers.
Jaime sighed. “You deserve more than a nameless life on the run. So does our child. I just can't stand the idea of another farewell. It may kill me, destroy me, drive me to the point of insanity. I will not know your fate. I cannot bear to watch everything I love and care about, fade into the distance on a boat bound for an uncertain future.”

“I did.” The lion furrowed his brow, not comprehending her meaning. “Just not a ship. A horse. Galloping away into the dead of night whilst the cold crept into my soul and I broke into a million pieces.” Turning to stare at him she explained further. “But I did it and I survived. Because you asked me to. Because you felt it was the best thing to protect me from the enemies who would tear us apart if given the chance. So I commended my soul to your ingenuity, gambled everything I had. Bore the silence and the separation believing in your word. If anyone knows the gravity of what I am asking of you Jaime – it is I. I have lived it. I do not deny that this is cruel. All I can beseech is that you have faith in me. Trust me, as I did you.”

“Well played Wench.” He glanced defeatedly around the room, taking in the hurriedly packed belongings and her travelling clothes. This was happening, whether they wished it or not. Brienne dragged herself from the bed and stood before him, beckoning him to her. “Come – this is not goodbye.”

Yet when she yanked his head to hers and crushed a bruising kiss upon his lips she poured into it all the intense feelings of her heart. She tried to drag herself away but he refused to let her go. Pulling at her chin for another round, squeezing her body firmly against his. Breathless, desperate, her flesh responding but knowing they could not. “Jaime....” She cautioned in the split seconds when she could free her mouth from his. He slipped his hand between their forms, resting it on her stomach. Connecting to both of them whilst they were still within his reach.

As they were warriors, this was just another battle of wills. She had to dig deep to gain the upper hand in this duel, for in essence it was one she wanted to lose. Catching his bottom lip between her teeth, she playfully gave it a sharp nip. Startling him as he pulled back in shock. It was enough to extricate herself from his possessive arms.

“Ow!” Jaime was incredulous, his hand flying to his face. His fingers coming away with a small trickle of blood. He sucked on his bottom lip, though she could see his admiration of her nerve. “Something to remember me by, once I'm gone.” Despite everything she smiled at her victory. This was a step by step process, one torture after another. Hastily she moved on to the next. Slipping her ring from her finger and handing it back to Jaime. “Last time, it was the promise of declarations. This time, it will be marriage. I want you to return this to my finger when next we meet. It is a Sapphire, so it continues our pact.” He took in gingerly. “I swear.”

“You cannot come to the dock. I do not want you to be spotted.” “I will be on the ramparts. You probably will not be able see me, but I will watch until you slip over the horizon. And long thereafter.”

Tears threatened, the burning a harbinger of their imminent appearance.
She needed to do this quickly.
“Have the staff bring my belongings.”
“Straight away.”
"Make sure you give the children their reward."
"They would never let me forget."

Deep breaths. “Tarth is yours Ser Jaime. The command is yours as Castellan. No matter what happens, you are in charge now, until my return or come what may. By order of the Evenstar.” The Lady Knight handed him a sealed envelope. “I have expressed my wishes for your continued rule within.”

“Brienne....”
“It is necessary.” Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she placed her hand upon the doorknob. I will allow myself one last look back....

His eyes were glassy. Hers were pained.
Together they expressed every emotion without words.
“I love you Jaime.”
“I love you too Brienne. I love you both. Enduringly - forever.”

She nodded, feeling herself breaking inside.
Without pause she exited their bedchamber.

* * *

It took all the resolve within her to make the journey down the dock.
Already missing the supportive terrain of her island beneath her feet.
The burnt orange of the setting sun an evocative analogy that soon her world would be plunged into desolate darkness.
Brienne nodded at the Captain and stepped onto the boat. The rocking of it upon the water matching the turbulence of her stomach.
But I am not alone.... She reminded herself.
Her secret nestled deep within her womb.

She gripped the railings to keep herself steady, she had been much more surefooted previously.
Covering in advance, she made her excuses to the Captain. “I have been standing vigil for my Father, I am greatly fatigued.”

Many had gathered to watch her departure, the mood on the shoreline sombre.
This was the second Tarth they had watched abandon them in the space of an afternoon.
Studying the ramparts, she told herself that Jaime would rally them. He was born to lead, they will flock to him.

Brienne wondered if he could see her. Squinting against the fading light, she tried to identify his figure. It was futile and most likely for the best.
“I will retire to my Cabin, if it does not cause inconvenience. This day has been troubling and I would relish some solitude.”
“Indeed Lady Commander.” The Captain seemed visibly relieved.
He clearly had not wanted a fight on his hands.

Striding to her allotted room, she shut the door behind, twisting the key in the lock.
Leaning against it and exhaling, she slid down the wood to the floorboards below.
Drained and apprehensive.

But she was a Knight, she had fought through worse and prospered.
Both herself and Jaime were resilient, their combined blood in this child would give it backbone.
She placed her hand upon her belly.
Together they would find their way back to Evenfall Hall.

*My focus must be my mission. I have a few days journey ahead....plenty of time to prepare.*
A little over one week later - a white cloak once again flowed from her shoulders. Brienne scrutinized herself in the looking glass to ensure she was pristine. Her morning sickness was difficult to conceal in the teeming castle. Upon the boat she had blamed the rolling motion of the waves, though it did draw unwanted curiosity - on previous voyages she had been unaffected. At least her retching had prevented any weight gain. Her stomach was yet to protrude. Though when she bathed she wondered if perhaps there was a softer rounding to her usual taut tight muscles.

There was one undeniable change in her figure though. Jaime had told her the night her Father died. Before their joy had come crashing down, whilst they were still laughing and everything was golden. “All your efforts for me and you cannot even tell that I am pregnant. It is too soon.” “There are changes.” Jaime had winked. “That is impossible! I am not yet showing.” She had been concerned that her withdrawal from practice time may affect her physique. Her body although ungainly, was all muscle. The results of years of gruelling training. She did not want it all thrown away. “Not your belly....” He had kissed her neck. The spark in his lascivious eyes troubling. “What are you talking about?” “Your breasts.” Then he laughed. “I am not arguing.” Her mouth had dropped open in shock. “I thought it was just my imagination.” She had noticed a few days prior, primarily it had been Jaime who drew her attention to it. When he had touched her amorously beside the tidal pool. They had been tender and he had stared for too long, making her self conscious. “You didn't have much to start with, so it is easier to notice.” He brushed their outline with the tip of his finger through the fabric of her shirt. Brienne frowned. “I'm not sure if I should be insulted by that.” “Don't bother – we both know it. Besides, I needed a reward for putting up with your moodswings.” That comment had earnt him a wallop on the shoulder which hadn't been enough to mute his chuckles at her bustline's expense.

Now as she had fastened her breastplate in place, she became acutely aware how accurate his assessment was. They were very clearly swollen and as she pressed the unforgiving steel against them – sore. Gritting her teeth she bound herself tighter, keen to secrete the telltale sign and praying that her suffering would be worthwhile.

Satisfied that her appearance was as near to her regular self as she was ever going to achieve, Brienne fastened Oathkeeper around her waist. This was to be her first shift back on duty. After her return she had been given a couple of days respite. Word of her Father's passing was swiftly sent to the King and the castle readily offered her their sympathies. Podrick had been especially glad to see her and made kindly enquiries about her time on Tarth. He was all compassion, under the impression that she had lost both her lover and Father over the last year or so. For the thousandth time she felt guilty for lying to her trusted comrade.

A council meeting had been held yesterday. She had only been asked at the final hour, with her presence deemed optional due to her allowed mourning period. Electing to attend in order to catch up on the state of the realm, Brienne seized upon the excuse of timing to wear her leathers.
She had then kept her arms crossed over her chest for most of the meeting. The King was noticeably absent but this wasn't unusual. Podrick made mention in secret that Bran had become considerably more reclusive. Spending the majority of his days either under the Weirwood or on the Terrace. The young Knight forced to spend many hours in these same locations, often late into the evening. Brienne felt a pang of pity for him.

Tyrion had extended to her his official condolences on behalf of himself and the rest of the small council. An interesting concept considering he killed his own Father – inadvertently her baby's paternal Grandfather. Though Jaime himself had admitted Tywin had it coming. As she sat, she pondered what an interesting family she was marrying into. However there were enough perplexing dynamics at that very table without her beginning to analyse the ramifications of events long since passed.

Though those thoughts were best left to yesterday - as today was the decider. The pinnacle of her quest. With one final glance at her reflection, she bade her jumbled nerves be still. She had anticipated the arrival of this moment for so long....when she would pose the question that would change everything. *Never put off for tomorrow, what you can do today. Start as you intend to proceed.* The adages were her foundations, the yearning her pillars but the trepidation her bricks and mortar.

One more time, she offered her prayer to the Seven. Repeating her mantra, giving her courage. *For Jaime.*  
*For our baby.*  
*For our future*....

* * *

*She comes.*

Bran Stark awaited the changing of the guard. His Lady Commander's first day back in her rightful place at his side. It pleased him to know she was still loyal. That the Kingslayer had not managed to leech the dedication from her body every time he seduced her into his sleeping furs.

Brienne's honour was both her downfall and her savior. Her predictability his surety. She was obedient, reverent and true to her word.

Others would not have been so pliable. Would have him turned into a King of War and blood, forcing him to slaughter his way through smallfolk on his path to vengeance. But not her....dutifully she delivered herself back to his control.

Perhaps her allegiances were divided. Between the Knight and the woman. However it mattered not....

In this castle, he was King. And she had bequeathed her life in service of his own. Instrumental to his reign.
Nothing was going to interfere.

Not the bastard in her womb.
And certainly not her heinous lover.
For her betrayal - she would part with them both.

It would hurt her of course but the Gods had built her strong.
Not for gratifying his enemies.
Not for bearing ill-gotten gets.

Her fate was to safeguard the Three Eyed Raven.
The King without Limits.
That was the purpose of her creation.
Why she had been fashioned as such a simple oath-bound creature.

* * *

And now dawns the time of her enlightenment...

* * *

“Ser Josmyn.” The sound of the Lady Commander's voice, snapped the young man to attention. Brienne was rather certain he had been daydreaming on the job. Not that she could blame him. The Terrace was ablaze with sunlight, heating the bricks and reflecting its jubilant warmth from their gilded armour. It was a glorious day, if she had been home with Jaime, she would gladly have napped on a blanket in the sun, until he woke her with suggestive kisses....

“At ease, you are dismissed.”

“Thank you Ser. Welcome back once again.”
She inclined her head in recognition as he retreated back inside the castle.

The King was parked in his usual spot, overlooking the great beyond. His routine was unchanging. Though she knew his esoteric talents allowed him to explore far further than appearances would suggest.

“Approach, Ser Brienne.”
His voice startled her, usually he was present in physicality but absent in spirit.

Ever compliant, she crossed the balmy expanse, her armour clanking noisily with every fall of her boots upon the cement.
She bowed low in greeting. “I have returned Your Grace.”
He blinked once slowly. “That I can see.”

Brienne's heart race increased as she tried to frame the beginnings of her conversation. She crouched low beside him, so they were eye level. “You were given word of my Father's passing.”
His response was a single, almost imperceptible nod.
But his stare was fixed upon her, chilling in its ambiguity.
She felt he looked straight through her, stripped back to lay bare her intentions, exposing her truth's and child within.

Do not be intimidated, you must persevere....

“I need to speak with you, Your Grace. I know it is impudent - my having only just returned - but I would have no misgivings between us.”
She perceived a miniscule twitch of his facial muscles. So fleeting she thought it perhaps a figment of her own creation.

But if not, what is it's meaning?
Brienne hung her head. Keen to break his unwavering eye contact. 

Exhibiting the shame she felt at going back on her word. 

**But some things go beyond houses and honour and oaths...**

“It is with the greatest humility that I must supplicate myself and humbly ask for you to release me from my vows as Lady Commander and of the King's Guard.”

She lifted her gaze. His mien had not altered.

“Please...your Grace.” She poured desperation and imploring into every syllable. “I have been so appreciative of the role which you entrusted to me but the conflict of my obligations has torn me asunder. I feel I am not able to fully commit to the high standard to which the title and my role deserves. It was my Lord Father's dying wish that I remain on Tarth. He wants me to rule and I am his sole heir. I could not deny my flesh and blood, the man who raised me alone and gave me life. And now he is gone I will never be absolved of that which he made me promise.”

They were not lies. Her Father had wanted these very things. “I only hope you can find it in your heart to take pity upon me. To know that there has never been acrimony between us. I am sorry for what befell your Ravens. My Father was quite determined in his ways. I am loyal, Tarth is loyal. I entreat you to do me this kindness. Grant me this boon and know that you have a leal and supportive subject for life.”

The King's silence was deafening as he contemplated. 

Turning his head towards the vast cerulean yonder, a distant vague expression encompassing his features.

After what felt like an eternity, he finally spoke.

“I knew what you planned to ask.
You see everything when you know how to look – woven amidst the threads of the future.
Time.....it is as the Raven flies. Unless something alters its trajectory - an impact, a pommel.....”

Her intuition sounded an alarm.

*There is a sinister implication behind his phrasing.*

“He was tall. Easily your height.
But his face was unmistakably Lannister, he had their eyes.
He was named after your Father – passing odd, it is both whom carried that name I've put an end to now
- though curiously you simply called him Wyn.”

Her blood rushed cold in her veins. Liquid glacial ice at his words.

*Our babe of Winter.....*

Memories flooded, the face of her attacker, through the blinding pain she could now see him clearly.

His eyes a milky white.

“The greatest swordsman Westeros has ever seen....there would not be a single Lord or Lady who wouldn't vote for him.
He had all the bearings of a King.”

The Three Eyed Raven regarded her with his odious dark brown eyes.

It made her skin crawl. His pupils dilated at the pleasure he derived from exacting his malice.
Encroaching so upon the iris, they almost looked black.

The windows to the soul, echoing the colour of this heart...

“I will never allow Jaime Lannister to produce a living child. I cannot.....so why should he?”

The threat was not even thinly veiled.
He knows.

“Give me a good clean death’ - his words.
Yes – death.
It would have been a mercy.
For me. And for him.
He should have stayed dead.
But now....what can atone for a crippled boy's suffering?
To be denied the one you love. Watching, waiting for a return that is never coming.
And I will feed him knowledge - he can know that his unborn was scoured from its Mother's womb once again.
That she has no choice but to stay bound by my side, instead of his, until the end of her days.
You believe in justice – don't you Ser Brienne?
You have been incredibly quiet as you received my answer. Have you nothing to say?”

He cannot compensate for spontaneous action....

“The things I do for love.”
With all her strength she shoved the King, sending his wheeled chair hurtling over the vertical drop of the Terrace.
Chapter Summary

We pick up where the previous chapter left off...

Chapter Notes

Ok, that last chapter and the reaction to it was soooo much fun!
I really truly love you all! :D

Brienne felt his frosty clutches, grasp for purchase in her mind – it lasted only an instant.
His parting message a bitter epilogue intended to haunt.
She drove him out, her will was iron, her psyche unassailable.

Then he was obliterated.
Dashed to pieces far below.

Several Raven's took to the sky, released from Bran's telepathic imprisonment.
Recalling their identity as free creatures of the air.
Returning whence they came, restoring their natural order.
Forgetting their interlude as minions of a damned soul.

Her legs quivered as she glanced over the edge.
The splattered red and splintered wood visible from the distance above.
His tyrannical ambitions reduced to an abhorrent smear upon the earth's surface.
She moved hastily in reverse before her knees buckled and she shared his grisly fate.

The scraping of steel and a familiar voice raised a whip to her already pounding pulse.
“Ser Brienne...” Lord Tyrion.
She turned to see the Hand of the King standing in the shadows beyond the sun.
Podrick was to his right, his hand fidgeting nervously on the handle of his sword.

It was Renly's tent all over again.
Only this time she was guilty.
Panic overtook her and tears sprang to her eyes.
Not Podrick....

Thumbing Oathkeeper for comfort and defence, she took a hesitant step towards them.
Each party eyeing each other warily. Alpha predatory creatures, poised to attack if the other so much as flinched.
She did not wish to harm them. These were people she cared about.
If it had been just her, she may have surrendered, acknowledging her crime.
But she had her baby to protect. What punishment ensued for her, so too befell her little one.
Somewhere along the way, she had become a protective lioness. She must defend her cub.
Jaime would be proud....
How much did they witness?
“....”
Where do I begin to defend myself? I slew the King.
Her hands trembled as did her bottom lip. This was not how it was supposed to unfold. Falling victim to impulse and emotion.

“My Lady Ser....” Podrick called her by that ridiculous title to draw her attention.
“I heard some of what the King said.” Releasing the handle of his sword he added with a tight smile. “My loyalty will always be with you.”

She exhaled. “Thank you Pod.”
The tears threatened to spill. They had been through so much together.
Brienne could never have imagined fighting him.

Quickly she recalled that there was another lion upon the Terrace....and he wasn't afraid of her. His allegiance was the one she needed.

“Yes. We did manage to catch some snippets towards the conclusion of that interesting exchange.” Lord Tyrion tottered to the sheer drop, peering over and grimacing.

“Couldn't have forseen the ending.”

He directed his mismatched accusatory eyes at her.
But his ire wasn't for the crime she expected.
“I gather you are pregnant. Who is the Father?”

Through it all, she could have laughed at the irony.

**Tyrion thinks I've forsworn my love for his brother....**

“Jaime lives.”
The Hand jumped back as though he had been shot by one of his own crossbow bolts.
“What?!” His tone was severe. “Do not lie to me in an effort to extricate yourself from the perilous situation you have landed yourself in.”

The insinuation stung. “I love your brother. I have never lain with anyone but him. You know that!”

“A convenient claim, given the circumstances.”

“Have I ever been the kind to lie?”

“In all due respect my Lady, I never thought you were the kind to kill your King.”

She levelled him with her steady blue gaze. “Then blame my child – it's Father's blood runs through its veins and flourishes inside me.”

“She loves Ser Jaime, My Lord. I know that much to be true.” Podrick chimed in to her defence.

Tyrion examined her face carefully, looking to detect any semblance of deception.

“You have some explaining to do. Quickly. Podrick bar the door. We don't want anyone getting in or out.”

He gestured for them to retreat inside.

An unstoppable surge of nausea bubbled inside her. “One moment....”
She clasped her hand to her mouth and ran, heaving violently into the nearest potplant.

The edge would have been more practical but she didn't trust her quaking legs.

“Well she is definitely with child. We have the truth in that.” Tyrion remarked dryly, watching her with bemusement.

“You are going to be an uncle again. You could be a little more empathetic.” She chastised him between heaves.

Her armour was stifling in the sun. Her temperature skyrocketing. The stress, the gore, the shame,
the humidity, everything making her ill.

Podrick was concerned, he appeared at her side, helping her up. “Are you alright Ser?”
“It's fine Pod. It's just a part of it. You get used to it after a while.”
Her legs were unstable and she leaned on his arm for support as they journeyed inside.
The young Knight was thinking. “You were like this back at Winterfell.”

“Was she?” Tyrion enquired.
Ignoring the Imp, Brienne lowered herself into a chair. “I didn't think you noticed.” Her armour
dug painfully into her chest. It felt like it was suffocating her.
“I was your Squire, of course I did. I thought you were sick. But it stopped after the attack....I
presumed you got well while you were recovering.”

“What attack?” The Hand of the King's brow furrowed.
“A trainee went rogue during training and struck her repeatedly in the gut.”
Brienne winced at the memory. The youngest Lannister noticed.

“Is that all there is to it?” He directed the question at her.
“No. I now know it was the joint doing of King Bran and Lady Sansa. They didn't want me to have
Jaime's child. Today that remained his Grace's position on the subject.”
“Make me understand.” Tyrion perched opposite her. “You fell pregnant at Winterfell but they
causedyou to lose the child? Was Jaime aware?”
“He was not. I was not. My naivete worked against me. The Starks figured out my condition before
I even realised it myself. Jaime had long since left.”

“And you are telling me, my brother is still alive – but I saw his body myself.”
“He suffered a blow to the head. Jaime was presumably unconscious when you came upon him. Of
course he does not remember you being there. Did you check his pulse?”
The Hand looked pained. “I did not. I am a fool. I was too bereaved.” He tapped his fingers on the
arm of the chair. “Sorry to bring up a sore point but didn't he abandon you at Winterfell to return to
Cersei?”
“No. That was a ruse.”

Tyrion blanched at the revelation and her candor.
Brienne continued. “Jaime orchestrated it. To protect me and to fake his death. He never trusted
the Starks or the Dragon Queen. Turns out he was correct on both scores. Jaime did intend saving
your sister and his child if he could. I told him he wouldn't be the honourable man I know if he
didn't at least try. Such a thing would weigh too heavily on both our consciences. Our plan went
astray when the Red Keep fell.”
“Well his odd behaviour when I parted with him now makes sense.” He shook his head in
disbelief. “I lectured you. I spoke of his unwavering devotion to Cersei and you never corrected
me...”

“I promised Jaime. I'm true to my word.” She sighed. “We were to reunite on Tarth. When he
wasn't there I became convinced he had actually died, that was when I accepted the post as Lady
Commander.”
“Your Father's health?”
“An exaggeration. A guise for my return. Jaime was there waiting for me. His recovery from the
injuries he sustained in the crypts took far longer than we could have predicted.”

“I do not know whether to congratulate you both for your brilliance or throttle you for not including
me – though I don't think given your size the latter would turn out in my favour.”
Podrick stood speechless on the sidelines, he seemed genuinely awe-struck by her confession.
“I am sorry - to both of you. I did not relish the deception but it was necessary.”
“And now? How stands the status quo? Officially-” Lord Tyrion raised an eyebrow. “-no more smoke and mirrors.”
“Jaime is on Tarth – acting as Castellan under a false name. I am carrying his heir. We are to be married, preferably before I am showing. I came to ask for dismissal from my vows.”
Swallowing she found the strength to say the rest. “I just discovered that the Three Eyed Raven murdered my Father and my first child. That he intended to keep me from Jaime forever as an act of twisted vengeance for his crippling. And he decreed that my baby would never be allowed to live. So in the heat of the moment I took measures to ensure he never fulfilled his threats.”

Her future good-brother smirked at her in his uniquely sardonic way, she knew it served as a precursor to his trademark acerbic wit.
“Long live a new family tradition of Kingslaying. You may have become Lannister sooner than you predicted Lady Brienne. It seems you already pay your debts...”
"A tragic accident.” Tyrion sat at the head of the Small Council table. An emergency meeting had been called for obvious reasons. The Lady of Tarth held her breath, bracing herself for the onslaught of questions and accusations. The Lord Hand had retreated from their earlier conversation, instructing her to leave it with him, speak to no-one and remain in her chambers until summoned.

Now she watched as the youngest Lannister calmly, handled the room. Managing the situation with adept aplomb. Tyrion seemed quite unperturbed about his role, damage control appearing effortless for him. Burying misdeeds a skill set often utilised by the Lions of the Rock. Coming as naturally as breathing.

By contrast her own lungs felt tight. Her chest clamped in a vice which was only slightly due to her restrictive armour. Brienne had spent her life avoiding sin and disgrace. Living by the philosophy that one should never perform an act which they would be ashamed to own to publically.

Until now....

She eyed the youngest Lannister hesitantly, questioning his motives. He had made Brandon Stark a King. Her actions had undone his handiwork. How can I not wonder where his ultimate support resides?

Trust was a precious commodity, one that did not come easily to her. Nor did bearing false accounts, although her actions would seem to the contrary. Throughout this whole long ordeal Brienne had sidestepped and circumvented, preventing blatant lying as much as possible.

With her future teetering poetically upon a precipice, she found herself reliant upon the most elaborate cover up to date. The decision to determine her own fate having been wrested from her hands. It was an uncomfortable feeling, though her malaise was completely deserved. I cannot believe I am an oathbreaker....

“So he just – what? Rolled off?” Ser Bronn scoffed and looked from person to person with barely masked amusement. His aloof detachment clearly remaining from his days as a sellsword. If I am going to be on trial, please may they hurry up and get it over with.

Tyrion had warned her before they parted. “Do not get any ideas of doing something foolish – like confessing.” His tone was stern. “Ideas of honour flew out the window – excuse my phrasing – with the King. No good can come from purging your conscience. Look what happened to Jon Snow. And Jaime for that matter. The stain of Kingslaying tends to mar a reputation...if you live to tell the tale.”

But the duplicity didn't rest agreeably with her. This is not the person I aspired to be....

The Hand of the King was addressing Bronn's concerns. “Who can really explain when the Stranger decides to come calling? There were three onlookers at the time. We all saw it. Lady Commander Brienne, Ser Podrick and myself. The flock of Ravens just....” Tyrion shrugged. “Went wild. They swarmed the poor King in his wheeled chair. The force of so many shook him loose from the grooves. In hindsight perhaps they should have been carved more deeply, as you all know he parked precariously close to the edge. The forward momentum was unstoppable, it all happened so quickly.” He shook his head in mock despair. “Well that is how I saw it anyway. I'm sure the others will corroborate my version of events.”
Ser Podrick nodded his agreement. Maester Tarly cleared his throat. “I have something to add....” All eyes turned to him as he stuttered. “I-I saw the Ravens. A great bunch of them flew past my tower. I was drawn to the window by their cawing. They came from the direction of the Terrace.” “Fuck then. That settles that. I nev'r understood what he liked about those birds.” The Master of Coin almost chuckled.

Brienne's expression was pained. This wasn't her - sitting mute and cowardly on the sidelines. Too craven to take responsibility for her decisions. If she didn't come clean, the lie would follow her forever. Tormenting her sleep. Ruining the peace she craved. She had no other choice.... “It was my doing – I'm the reason the King is dead. The blame rests squarely on my shoulders and I should be held accountable.”

Tyrion seemed entirely unsurprised at her outburst. Almost like he expected it. “That is very noble of you Ser but entirely unnecessary. There is no use in implicating yourself for an unfortunate turn of events. No matter how culpable you may feel, nobody at this table condemns you for being unable to save his Grace.” Ser Davos inclined his head somberly. “He speaks wisely My Lady – no good can come of it. I've been there. I've cursed myself for things I couldn't change. Those thoughts only serve to tear you apart.”

The Lady Knight's brow creased in consternation. She was telling the truth and they didn't believe her. “But I insist it was my folly! The King died at my hands...”

“I know the protection of the King was in your hands at the time but being on duty when something terrible unfolds is not the same as premeditated murder.” The youngest Lannister spoke so gently, as if he was consoling her. Twisting her words to negate their meaning. “If we held the Kingsguard at fault for each sovereign they lost, there would be none of the institution left.” “Damn right! This place goes through more rulers than I go through whores – and that's saying something!” Ser Bronn thought himself amusing.

Brienne stared at Tyrion, her mouth flapping open uselessly. He was foiling every attempt she made at confessing her misdeed. One more attempt.... “I-” “Lady Commander please, do give up! Next you are like to say you pushed him just to try and take the weight upon your own shoulders. The King is dead. I am sorry it happened on your watch. I know you will take that very much to heart. I assure you it is not a failure on your part and not one soul on this council is going to hold you responsible, regardless of your very valiant attempts. You are just going to have to live with the knowledge.”

The others were nodding. “I sympathise Ser Brienne, truly I do.” The Master of Ships was solemn but caring. “It must ’ave been a traumatic thing to witness.” Samwell was as benevolent as ever. “We know how seriously you take your job My Lady, I have lost people in my care and it is always difficult. But we have to continue on....there is always someone else to help.” The former sellsword just shrugged. “Ain't no-one 'ere wants to listen to your self-righteous shit. Moral bloody toff. He died. Get over it. Some other lackwit'll take his place.”

Tyrion was triumphant although he hid it well. 

He is unbelievable....but I am not so easily dissuaded.
“I insist upon a punishment.” She shot the Imp a withering look. “Our monarch died upon my shift. That surely warrants disciplinary action.”

“Very well Lady Brienne.” The youngest Lannister leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. “Seeming as you are so stubbornly insistent.....and it may help your wounded spirit find closure. There is only one punishment which I see fitting. I hope you will not deem it too harsh, I would hate for you to regret raising the topic.”

“Please. I am prepared. I throw myself upon the mercy of the council.”

She was keen to receive a sentence. A penitence for her to serve in order to assuage her guilt.

The Hand of the King straightened. “Gentlemen of the Council – I propose that Lady Commander Brienne is removed from her position and relieved of her duties on the Kingsguard. It seems a proper compromise for being unable to save his Grace. She will have her former titles and properties restored, henceforth returning to being Lady Brienne or rather Ser Brienne of Tarth. All in favour - say aye.”

*Descended from Lann the Clever indeed.*

Characteristically stoic, she nodded in encouragement at them. She would take this judgment. A hesitant chorus of assent soon followed.

*It is done.*

“There we have it. Ser Brienne, after our meeting is adjourned, we will be requiring your White Cloak.”

“Yes, My Lord.” Her voice was low, a strange mixture of sadness, shock and relief.

“Moving on. I do not wish to appear insensitive but our next topic is to address the Appointment of a New King. We cannot leave the Six Kingdoms without a ruler. I for one certainly didn't think we would be here again so soon.

Maester Tarly – we shall organise Ravens to be sent with word to each of the noble houses immediately. There will be both exclusions and new additions to the list of lieges who qualify for voting – the shape of our Kingdom has changed somewhat since we last convened. I sincerely doubt they will wish to travel back to the Dragonpit after having just settled in their respective homelands but if their votes are wax sealed we should be able to tally a ballot. Give them both options. We will discuss the particulars in finer detail after the meeting....”

* * *

As each of the council members cleared the room only Brienne and Tyrion remained. She waited until they were ensured privacy before speaking. “Deftly done.”

“Why thank you.” He steepled his fingers, looking quite pleased with himself. “I trust you will stay on long enough to cast your vote on behalf of Tarth and it will take you a while to pack up your chambers in the White Sword Tower. I know you decline the assistance of staff whenever possible.”

He was making smalltalk, avoiding the larger issue in the room.

Brienne took a deep breath. “I want you to know - I would have accepted the consequences of my crime. You needn't have perjured yourself for me.”

“My Lady – your honourable character cleared your name, even with your predictable confession. No one would ever believe you capable, even if they saw it with their own eyes. Then if they knew the reason why they would surely appreciate your defence. But beyond that – you do not yet understand where I place my values.” His impish eyes sparked as he grinned at her. “I have always cared about my family and you have more important things to do than rotting in a dungeon – like
growing my niece or nephew.”
Brienne cleared her throat in an effort to stifle her amusement. She and the council members sat arranged at the Dragonpit as Maester Tarly ceremoniously broke the wax seals and unveiled each parchment’s contents. Waiting for the ravens to return had been painstaking and she had earnestly hoped no Lordling had decided to make the pilgrimage back to the Crownlands. If that were the case, she may well be celebrating her babe’s first nameday before their kingdom had a new ruler. Fortunately – one by one the responses had arrived, the sigils counted and checked. It was an acceptable system, it had been emphasised in the instructions that in order for votes to be deemed valid, they must be written and signed in the Lord’s own hand. This way the letters could be retained as proof against tampering.

The Lady of Tarth observed the pervading tone of the attendees. It was a vastly different mood than when they last congregated. Imbued with familiarity and genuine hope. The grim spectre of the past finally being laid to rest. Bran Stark had been a constant reminder of the Long Night. A call back to a time when innocence was lost and dark supernatural forces threatened their way of life. With the closing of his chapter a new era dawned – of true peace, mateship and most importantly family. Or at least that was how she viewed it. Her liberation had lent a rosy hue to her vision of the world.

Easy and relaxed were the postures of her compatriots. Although their business was serious, she had learned that with these particular council men it seldom remained so.
And the Imp wasn’t helping matters. Tyrion was leaning on the arm of his chair, resting his head in his hand and dramatically groaning.

“Another absentee vote....” Samwell stood in the centre, diligently ensuring that his every move was in full view – utter transparency was his credo. In this referendum, there was no place for corruption. “....Prince Martell sends his apologies but he is unwilling to make the journey from Dorne. He has written – ’in respect to the opinions of the late Prince Oberyn Martell; who chose to
fight as champion for Lord Tyrion Lannister at his trial by combat thus demonstrating faith in his character and vocation, House Martell will continue in this spirit and pledge their support for Lord Tyrion.”

“What did I do to deserve this?” The youngest Lannister complained. “You were too clever.” His future good-sister prodded him verbally. She was quite enjoying the turn of events. The Hand of the King was always so sure he could anticipate everyone's next move – yet he failed to see this one coming.

“That makes—” Maester Tarly tallied. “the votes of Dorne, the votes of the Westerlands and two of the votes from the Stormlands so far – in favour of Tyrion Lannister.”

The Lords and Lady exchanged smug smiles. They all had votes yet to be cast. The final Stormland vote was hers.

“Next comes from the Vale..... Lord Royce wishes to honour the choice of the late King. He states that 'King Bran the Broken instilled Lord Tyrion to the position of Hand, thus ensuring a peaceful reign. Therefore the Lord Hand should ascend to the position.’”

He cracked the next envelope open. “Lord Robin Arryn writes that he hopes this nomination will make amends for the false accusations and trial Lord Tyrion suffered at the Eyrie and that he will gladly support the Lord Hand’s appointment as King.”

“This is tragic! First a cripple, now a dwarf!” Tyrion rose to standing, looking aghast. “The Kingdom's gone mad! Nobody wants to see my image on a coin.” “Damn straight.” Ser Bronn chipped in his pennies worth. “I'm the one who'd have to look at your ugly mug.”

Samwell wisely ignored them and continued. “Lord Edmure Tully simply asserts that 'the existing council are performing well, so why change things? If his nephew was content for Lord Tyrion to run Westeros from the position of hand, then Lord Tyrion can rule as King.’” “Keeping me conveniently away from the West. So selfless...” His rueful observation did little to slow the impetus.

Now the wheels had been set in motion, they rolled swiftly towards their destination. Tyrion plonked himself down defeatedly.

“With the omission of the independent neighbouring Kingdom's of the Iron Islands and the North along with their accompanying bannermen – they fall under their own jurisdiction, so have no say over our own governance – the only representatives yet to vote as those here present.” Maester Tarly rearranged his robes and took his seat, looking at them all expectantly.

The assembly were uncharacteristically quiet. Waiting for someone to make the initial move.

“Well...I'll start. Seeming as no one else wants to.” Ser Davos was as congenial as ever. “I'm willing to say, we do a good job. I think we make a fine team. Lord Tyrion has already been overseeing the Kingdom and taking all the responsibilities. Let's make it official. He's got my vote – is anyone going to second?” “Aye.” Samwell smiled encouragingly at the dismayed Hand. “You're the most qualified and the best choice.”

“Tell me someone here has some common sense!” His whinging was loud and theatrical. “Aye.” Brienne smiled at Jaime's little brother. “I vote for you Lord Tyrion.” “Ser Brienne...how could you? I thought better of you than this.”
The council had begun to snigger, it was quite contagious and she discovered she was not immune.

Podrick found his voice. “I know House Payne is small....but can I vote yes?” He was officially attending in the capacity of KingsGuard but became enthusiastic at the prospect of a crown for his former master.
“Of course Pod.” Brienne replied. “We value your opinion.”

Tyrion sighed loudly, turning in appeal to his last chance.
The upjumped sellsword.
“Bronn...we know each other. I'm a terrible choice. Yours is the deciding vote – don't make this unanimous.”
“You're right that you're a terrible choice but if I have to take orders from some rich fucker, it may as well be you. Aye.”

Tyrion pinched the bridge of his nose and slumped back in his chair. “I need a drink.”
“Your Grace!....Please stop forestalling me. I must depart. You know the reason why my time is pressing and I have....”

Brienne lowered her voice. “Someone anxiously awaiting news of me. He won't have received the ravens you sent. As far as Tarth knows, those birds remain the enemy.”

She had intercepted their new sovereign on the way to the throne room. Ser Davos had apologised profusely to her that morning when he had to deny her umpteenth request for a vessel, citing the reason as 'by order of the King.'

The Lady Knight was getting antsy to make her egress from the capital.
When bathing the previous evening she had noticed a subtle swell in her lower abdomen. It wasn't noticeable to outsiders but she knew it was there. A physical reminder of her baby's presence, making the passage of another sennight.

She could not wait to show Jaime. Share her adventures with him. Kiss his lips and feel his muscular arms wrapped around her. She couldn't stand that he was likely in the dark about their circumstances, enduring sleepless lonely nights worried about her and their child. It seemed an age since she had rested soundly, entwined with him as though they were one being.

Each day of their separation passed like a year, a lengthy tedious stretch in the blighted depths of winter, where days crawled and morose souls craved the rejuvenation of springtime rays. That is how she felt in the absence of Jaime, a mighty oak shivering, suffering - struggling to flourish when deprived of the nurturing sun.

“Please My Lady, call be Tyrion. All this Your Grace nonsense is yet to sit comfortably with me. I was much more accustomed to people being openly insulting. Besides, it makes me uneasy – you have a history with monarchs.”

She rolled her big blue marbles, glancing around to ensure they weren't overheard.

“You think I didn't check first? Have faith Ser Brienne, you grapple with it so. And I say the same in regards to the boat. There is method in my ways. Come! I am holding court. You won't want to miss this charade.”

He lifted his eyebrows in a distinctively impish manner before waddling off.

His playful demeanour reminded her of Jaime. One of the few ways in which they resembled each other as brothers.

The Lady Knight huffed, having little choice but to trail after him.
Minor dignitaries, nobles and Knights crammed themselves into the makeshift throne room. The small council stood to the side of the dais. She had not been privy to their numerous recent meetings, having relinquished her seat along with her role as Lady Commander. Nevertheless she scrutinized the Kingsguard standing to the opposite side. Ser Josmyn attended the King, who was making a fuss over something. Habitually she strode over to Podrick, tugging on his armour to straighten it. “Your spaulders are crooked again.”

Her loyal friend smiled. “Apologies My Lady.”

“You need a squire of your own.” Brienne was hopeful her suspicions were correct about one of today's announcements. Upon returning her White Cloak and armour, she and Tyrion had began a lengthy conversation on the topic. Her chambers were almost completely packed, with just the few necessities she required for daily life remaining.

If I am ever able to leave....

The King smiled at his nearest confidants – herself included.

“Right, a new high-priority order of business is to find myself a suitable throne...apologies about the delay. I don't know why my illustrious council didn't think of that earlier but time to begin nonetheless.”

He alighted upon the makeshift chair and gestured to Ser Davos.

“All Hail Tyrion of House Lannister, First of his Name. King of the Andals and the First Men, Mastermind of the Battle of the Blackwater, Lord of the Six Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, Long may he reign.”

The crowd echoed. “Long may he reign.”

Brienne heard Tyrion mutter under this breath. “That was underwhelming.”

He plastered on a pleasant smile and addressed the assembly.

“My Lords, Ladies and Sers. I thank you for attending the first court held in my name. Since my coronation the council and I have worked tirelessly to ensure this transition is as smooth as possible for the people of King’s Landing and for the realm. This having been said, there are of course a few changes and decrees to note....” Tyrion took a deep breath, his eyes encompassing the room, making everyone feel included.

He is good at this. It suits him well.

She felt a surge of pride for Jaime's little brother. He was managing everything beautifully, taking it in his stride.

He shall be a good King.

“My first duty to the Crown is to appoint a new Hand of the King, seeming as the previous one is now otherwise occupied.” He could not keep the sarcasm from his tone. “I wish to promote Ser Davos Seaworth to the role. He is an honourable man, with previous experience in this particular field and I know he will be of great assistance to me.”

Ser Davos, ever humble, simply nodded at the applause.

“Next is the ascension of a new Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. After consulting extensively with former Lady Commander Ser Brienne, we both feel that this individual is extremely worthy of the position – having squeezed for both of us previously.”

Brienne grinned, watching Pod's reaction.

He lifted his head and looked at her in disbelief.

“We therefore welcome our new Lord Commander; Ser Podrick Payne. May you continue to serve
me as loyally as you did many moons ago.”
“I-I won’t let you down Your Grace.” The young man had tears of joy in his eyes. It affected her on a maternal level.

**He deserves this. People have always underestimated him.**

Tyrion glossed over the nervous stutters with a jape. “I am glad to hear it Ser, I am rather fond of being alive.”

The crowd tittered, the underlying meaning fully comprehended by all.

“Continuing on the topic of the Kingsguard, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge and express our gratitude to Ser Brienne Tarth. She served brilliantly as Lady Commander and although she is now retired from the position I wish the court to know that her dismissal is no reflection upon her honour or capabilities. She herself amicably agreed to the decision of council and her removal from my service allows her to embark upon a new adventure with my full blessing and support.

Which – I hope she does not mind me saying – includes ruling over her homeland of Tarth and her upcoming marriage.”

“Tyrion.” She mouthed through gritted teeth, resisting the urge to growl at him.

*How could he out me in a public forum! What is he thinking?*

Her cheeks burned as over fifty pairs of eyes turned to regard her.

“These are joyous tidings. Even moreso when the journey is considered....

Westeros and its people have endured through trying times of late. I will touch upon those bleak events but briefly in order to make a commendation.”

*What is he doing?*

The King took a deep breath. “The burning of King's Landing is a vision horrifically scarred into the minds of the survivors. As our great city rebuilds we still see the confronting evidence – ash, char and bones.

But on that cursed day there was an attempt to spare us from the destruction. Every man, woman and child will recall the moment the Bells rang – in defiance of the Queen and in an effort to stay the slaughter. In the midst of the chaos, such a task was of paramount importance, it could only be entrusted to a brave man, one who was willing to take great personal risks for the good of the people.

It is little known that it was in fact my brother – Ser Jaime Lannister – who avowed himself to the task and succeeded. Battling through the worst of conditions in an effort to save thousands of innocent lives.

I wish to make this information widespread, not as a brother, but as a King. May it travel far and wide so that he may be hailed in reputation as the hero which he embodies.”

Brienne's heart swelled to ten times its size. The murmurs of the crowd were a mixture of surprise and shock as they tried to reconcile what they were hearing against the image of the Kingslayer they thought they knew. The man behind the infamy. His true soul, of which only she and Tyrion had intimate knowledge.

“It was not the first time he saved this city.” The youngest Lannister made eye contact with Brienne. In short bursts during their concealed grief, tales of Jaime had been their currency. Both aching from a sense of loss they could not outwardly mourn. After she had requested possession of Jaime's golden hand the pretense of her indifferent heart had fallen away. She knew Tyrion could see through her facade.

In hindsight she was glad. It had been her saving grace upon the Terrace, when he decided to believe without any concrete proof, that the fruit of her womb could only belong to his brother. In those days of her impregnable melancholy, the Lord Hand would often pass the Lady Commander in the hall or whilst she stood guard outside a chamber door. Sometimes he would find her staring despondently into her water goblet, an untouched trencher of food in front of her.
He had doubled back and offered her tales of Jaime. Snippets from his childhood. Things to make her brighter and enliven her imagination. Although she tried to remain dispassionate, her needy heart had gobbled up the morsels of information like a starving woman. Turning them over and over again in her mind. Bringing Jaime to life for her, even if just in the form of a fleeting daydream.

The night he found her at the table, devoid of appetite and zest for life alike, she had offered her own tale in return. The truth of Jaime and Aerys. She had needed to speak of him. To have his little brother know what a great man he truly was. In the retelling, revelatory tears had streaked down her cheeks, splashing upon the wooden tabletop, blotting the teak with their telltale presence. By the end Tyrion himself had to take his leave, his own eyes swollen and red. That had been their final exchange of this nature and they hadn't spoken on it since.

Until now....

“But I won't betray confidences to detail the other instance. Though I urge you all, each individual here today, to know that it exists and that I speak truth. I swear it by the Light of the Seven. Perhaps one day the account will be shared and the subjects of the Six Kingdoms will remember this speech and listen with open, receptive minds. So that henceforth disparaging remarks and slurs may be laid to rest - once and for all.”

The King steadied himself, regaining composure after speaking about such a sensitive topic. “Now I suppose you are wondering what point I am making? Well that is the exciting part, recent news to my ears as well. I will be travelling this afternoon and I invite my Lord's of Council to join me if they so desire. I intend accompanying Lady Brienne as she returns to Evenfall Hall and will be attending the upcoming nuptials between herself and my brother, Ser Jaime Lannister. I very much look forward to calling her family.”
Emergence

Chapter Notes

Picks up where the previous chapter left off. Brienne's POV.
Tying up loose ends in King's Landing.... :D

Shit! Now it is going to be a grandiose affair.
She had already been anxious about the prospect of a noble wedding on Tarth but with a few short sentences from His Grace, King Tyrion it had swiftly blown out of proportion.
And she was inwardly dying a slow, painful courtly death.

Aristocrats accosted her from all angles as they filed out of the throne room, eager to grasp for favour with the new King by being seen to issue her their blessing.
Brienne smiled and thanked them graciously, noting those who were genuine from the overtly flowery, peppered with fake niceties.
Jaime warned me about King's Landing. He was right. These people never even looked at me before.

Mayhaps in a few of the women she detected a shade of jealousy....
She caught a lesser Lady looking her up and down, a nostril flared on one side.
Jaime was deliciously handsome, rich and powerful. The exact kind of man who would be the pinnacle for a woman to snare as her Lord husband. The Lady Knight chastised herself for the rush of glee which seized her. She should have been hurt, the implication behind the disgust was plain. It couldn't have been more obvious if she'd come straight out and asked 'why would a man like that want someone like you?'
But instead for once in her life it did quite the opposite. Filling her with an immense sense of satisfaction and pride.
She doesn't know the half of it. I have a secret within.

Ignoring the urge to acknowledge her babe was becoming difficult.
At night she could wrap one arm protectively around her belly. But during the day, she had to pretend she wasn't with child.
Just another thing that is going to make this new development trying....

“I always knew the two of ya had somethin’ goin.’” Ser Bronn swaggered over to where she stood.
“But I thought the blond fucker was dead!”
Brienne responded with a tight smile. “I would be glad to pass on to Ser Jaime your delight that he lives.”
“Oh no. I'll be tellin' him in person. I'm coming to this wedding. Just tell me all the woman on Tarth aren't as uptight as you?”
She hoped her face didn't reveal her chagrin.
Find patience, Jaime did say Bronn has saved his life several times.

“Lady Brienne.” Ser Davos approached warmly.
“Lord Hand, congratulations on your new position. It is well deserved.”
“Thank you and congratulations in return. I am glad that you have something to look forward to – I thought you were quite harsh on yourself to insist on a punishment. But I see now it all worked out
for the best.”
“Often our lives can take unexpected turns.”
“Indeed.” He stepped closer, whispering to add. “The way the pair of you looked at each other when he gave you that Knighthood, I don't believe for a second this is a political alliance.”
She felt her mouth twitch into a shy smile. “You are a very observant man Ser Davos.”
“As far as I'm concerned – a blind man could see it. Now I must go and organise our fleet for the journey. I do intend to come along if that is alright with you.”
“It most certainly is.”

“Ser Brienne.” Maester Tarly barreled over, rushing to catch her between well-wishers. “I just wanted to say I'm very happy for you and Ser Jaime.”
“We appreciate that.”
“Unfortunatley I won't be coming to the wedding. It is nothing against either of you, so please don't take it that way. It's just Gilly and I have the two little ones and somebody has to stay behind to oversee things here.”
“I understand completely. Do not give it another thought. Your kind words are plenty. Believe me there will be enough guests.”
Samwell was sympathetic. “I get the feeling you are more like me and would have preferred a smaller private ceremony.”
“Often on the council I thought you and I saw eye to eye. But I'm afraid I cannot be granted everything I want and will have to tolerate in silence.”
“You are marrying into the family who holds the crown. It changes things.”
“It definitely does.” I am learning that rapidly.
“I will take my leave. The King is on his way over.” Sam scurried off as Tyrion proudly sauntered over to her.

“Future good-sister! How does it feel to have that shouted from the rooftops?”
“Rather like an imposition Your Grace.”
“Nonsense! You will not fool me into thinking you were happy to be marrying some Duncan... what was that pun my brother thought up?”
“Bluestone.”
Tyrion chuckled. “Yes. That's right. And now we are all bound for the Sapphire Isle.”
“We are ill-prepared for such numbers and as you know time is an issue...”
“Many hands make light work. I am arranging assistance. It will all be ready faster than previously. Leave the organiseing to me.”
Even though the weather was warmer, that thought still managed to raise gooseflesh along the length of her arms.
He means well. That was clearly going to have to become her new mantra.
She abruptly changed the subject. “May I enquire which members of the Kingsguard you intend to bring?”
“You may. But as I'm sure you've already guessed our new Lord Commander insisted he was non-negotiable.”
“Good for him. But you will travel with at least two I would expect?”
“Spoken like a woman who hasn't quite registered her retirement from duty but yes I will need another. Who do you suggest?”
“Bring Ser Josmyn. He was Lord Jaime's squire. My betrothed would be happy to see him.”
“I always suspected that was the reason you chose him for the Kingsguard. Very well. I will inform Pod.”
“Thank you Tyrion.”

He seemed happy that she remembered to call him by name instead of his new title. Astute as ever, he let his jesting slip away as he enquired. “Did you like any element of my surprise?”
“The things you said about Jaime were beautiful. You have my gratitude. He deserves their acknowledgment of his sacrifices.”
“I couldn't agree more. Though I am more tactical than that...” The King crooked his finger, silently asking her to lean down so they could speak in hushed tones. “...I could not just stand there and trumpet out that Jaime is alive. He was never well loved. The news would have been received with displeasure and mistrust. But nor could I allow the two of you to persevere in a life closeted by secrets and cover ups. Everyone thought that Jaime was dead. It was never explicitly declared – just presumed by the masses. Instead of directly contradicting the knowledge – I had to shift their focus. Now they are busy wondering what deeds I alluded to and are distracted by the fact that two very unlikely people are to be married. I bridged that gap though by painting Jaime in a hero’s light. It makes more sense now why a woman as honourable as yourself would wish to wed and bed him.”

“Yet no logic whatsoever why he would in turn desire me.” Her mouth twisted sardonically. “You did well by us Tyrion. I can only appreciate that. Even if now our wedding is a spectacle. Half of Kings Landing are probably out by the docks booking passage on ships to see Brienne the Beauty tie herself to the Kingslayer.”
“And neither of you are the type to let that hinder you. Take what pleasure you can from it. Regardless of their protestations, many will be seething with envy – but you know that already don't you?” He tested her for a reaction, constantly determined to needle her feminine proclivities to the surface. Her face betrayed none of her thoughts. “We shall make for a queer sort of family, won't we Your Grace?” She intentionally evoked his title in the same manner she did with Jaime. Her calling card to remind a Lannister when they were stepping out of bounds.
“Yes - you who gives away very little, aligned with Jaime and I who never learned to shut our mouths.” A faraway look overcame him. “I very much look forward to seeing my brother again. I never thought I would....” He quickly dashed the doldrums away. The sorrows and mistakes of the past best left to yesterday. “So, Ser Brienne – are you ready to set sail this afternoon?”
“Absolutely.” There was nothing she wanted more.

* * *

She dragged the final wooden chest, laden with her belongings across the floorboards. Normally she would lift it - she possessed the strength but knew it wasn't wise in her delicate condition. The servants had already collected the majority and were making their way down to the harbour.

“Ser-let me.” Podrick appeared at the door to her chambers. For once she had left it wide open, no longer concerned with concealing the treasures which she guarded close to her heart. All were now tucked securely away and bound for Tarth. The room left behind, sparse and gutted ready for its new inhabitant.
“Thank you Pod. Normally I would do it myself, but heavy lifting isn't advisable.” She sighed and added. “Your position now is well above having to move my things.”
“It does not bother me. I am only here because of you.”

They wound their way down the spiralling steps. Podrick carried the chest through the main room, around the mighty table and deposited it in the hall beyond. Brienne lingered, running her hand over the polished wood as she approached the Book of Brothers. Her mind overflowing with memories. Oathkeeper. Her armour. The pages of history. She gingerly traced the decorative scrolling on its leather bound cover.
“Lord Commander – might I beg your indulgence of one final act before everything is officially yours?”
“Of course My Lady.”

She retrieved the writing tools from a draw in the corner of the room. Thumbing to Jaime's page and closing her eyes as she thought of the wording.

**Died protecting his Queen.**

With a flourish of the quill she altered the punctuation. The full stop previously implying finality, changing with her purposeful strokes.

**Died protecting his Queen; to the knowledge of the masses.**

* A key element in a meticulously orchestrated preplanned ruse to evade his enemies and protect the innocent.

* Heroically sounded the Bells in an attempt to save the people of King's Landing from slaughter.

* Sustained critical injuries during the fall of the Red Keep.

* Spent nigh on a year recovering.

* Travelled to Tarth where he was appointed Castellan by the Evenstar.

* Wed his long time ally, confidant and love – former Lady Commander Brienne Tarth.

At her triumphant smile, Podrick approached, reading over her shoulder. He grinned back at her. “Happy now Ser?”

“Very.” She watched the ink soaking the parchment, drying to leave its indelible legacy.

“My pages I leave in your capable hands. You know enough about me to do it justice. Please add our children, I have left enough space. We never know what the future holds.”

“It will be an honour – though I'm not as articulate as you.”

“Jaime filled it out with his left hand, no scrawl can be as illegible or comments as disillusioned. Oh and Podrick? Perhaps leave some of mine until we are very old, I wish the truth to be known about the Terrace. This book deserves honesty but for obvious reasons it cannot be committed to paper at this point in time. Also, if Tyrion manages to convince Jaime to share his other tale, it should be added as an afterthought.”

Podrick sucked in his lips to avoid a chuckle. “Anything else My Lady Ser?”

She exhaled. “I'm terribly bossy aren't I?” Fetching the keys to her chambers she held them out to Podrick.

“The command is yours Ser. May it be long and distinguished.”

* * *

As predicted the harbour teemed with activity. Shiphands shouted orders from the deck as the Royal Fleet was prepared for departure.

Ser Davos chatted with the King. Ser Josmyn watchfully hovered behind, hand on his sword.

Brienne's large strides ate up the gravel as she moved to join them. Excitement to be underway fuelled her pace. Podrick broke from beside her to join in guarding the King. There were far too many people for one White Cloak to monitor.

The sails of the King's flagship majestically unfurled, snapping Lannister Crimson in the oceanic breeze. “What do you think?” Tyrion called out to her. “Can't have Jaime launching an attack on us now can we?”

“I cannot believe what I am seeing.” It was the truth. The sight of the Golden Lion filled her with joy. Once that sigil had instilled fear, today it gleamed with felicitous promise. “Am I to travel with you?”

“Of course. We are to be family.” The King began his journey up the gangplank. “To Tarth!”

With one final look at the sprawling city she boarded the ship alongside her future good-brother.
“To Jaime…”
Reunited

Chapter Summary

Jaime's POV. The fleet arrives in Tarth...

“Watch your balance.” Steel scraped against steel, its song the melody of life and death. Jaime lifted his blade and parried the blow from one of the castle garrison. “If you are unable to watch multiple opponents...” He spun to face the second, catching the blade in its downward arc and thrusting it back towards the soldier. “...You may as well take up embroidery.”

Ragged breaths whistled through his teeth from the effort of instructing whilst demonstrating. Whipping the armed forces of Evenfall into shape had been one of his main occupations as he counted the days. Operating under the assumption that soon they would go to war. He had bargained with himself following her departure, staying behind was not in his nature. So he would give her a moon's turn – enough time to arrive, ask for release and then make her way back to him. Any longer and her position may become compromised by an obviously potted belly. Jaime marked the days off, growing increasingly more anxious. He knew he was sleep deprived, drained by fatigue. Rest evaded him – he needed to cuddle into her warm neck or hold her fast against his chest. To know she was safe and he could protect her. Instead worry near permanently furrowed his brow and he was concerned it gave rise to lines.

“Ser Duncan!” A guard shouted urgently from the ramparts high above. “There are ships on the horizon! They are headed this way!”

“Get my horse!” Jaime commanded. The men he had been training scrambled for armour. *If they mean to bring conflict to our shores, they will meet with the armies of Tarth.*

A stablehand brought forth one of the tall destriers.
In truth the beast was Brienne’s but he knew she wouldn't mind him riding it. He rode her after all....
If he weren't so preoccupied he would have chuckled at his own jape. Instead he mounted and kicked the horse into a gallop, charging headlong for the docks.

* * *

“How stands the situation?” Jaime barked. Reining up his mount and demanding information from the port soliders.
He vaulted from the saddle and strode over to them wishing he wore mail instead of leathers. But this arrival had been unexpected.
*I would fight them naked if I had to.*

“Ser, curiously most of the ships have thrown out anchor. Only one continues to draw near and....”

“And what?!” Jaime demanded.

“We're not sure what to make of the sigil. It is not the Raven standard.”
He stomped down to where the pier met the sea, dodging smallfolk and weaving parallel amongst vendors to get a better look.
Squinting his eyes to focus on the distant shape.
It was a royal ship, but the mainsail fluttering in the southerly wind was crimson.
A larger gust fully inflated the fabric and a golden lion danced proudly in front of him.
Is this a trick?

“Have the archers at the ready.” He called out behind him.
“Yes Ser.”
“Let us see if they are friend or foe.” His heart hammering against his ribcage. The Lion of Lannister. What does that mean?

He knew several ravens had been shot down in the last week. It agonised him every time. Knowing that their message sank with them below the rippling waves to the bottom of the strait. Word of his lady he could never recover.
Jaime knew he should draw back. But he was hypnotised by his house colours.
Did he dare hope?

As the vessel advanced closer he began to make out details.
It was a different ship than previously. Grander and finer craftsmanship.
He recognised it as perhaps one his sister had commissioned following the Battle of the Blackwater.
It had that uniquely pretentious quality that could only belong to the Lannisters.
Wanting to make a statement that even their boats were luxurious and extravagant.
Focus ing in on the bow he caught a glimpse of a silhouette, standing at the forecastle. Like the figurehead of the boat itself.
Tall and proud with a glint of blonde hair....

Brienne.
How did she come to be on a Lannister ship?

The circumstances did not matter. She was here. Returned to him.
“Lower your weapons!” His cry was relayed back from the soldiers behind him to the concealed archers.
Breaking into a run he flew to the end of the dock, pacing its length as he urged the tides to pull her closer.
Now she saw him and her face broke into a beaming smile. He could just make out her teeth, gleaming at him.
Ship hands raced to catch the ropes as the vessel came to a stop. They locked eyes with each other and she walked around to the side of the deck, keeping in line with him as the ship turned. Never breaking contact.
The gangplank was prepared as the boat was secured to the dock.
She didn't wait, bounding over the small gap with her long legs to land in front of him and straight into his waiting arms.

“Brienne! You could have fallen.” He was already planting desperate kisses on her forehead and temples as he admonished her.
“I told you I learnt to sail before I could ride a horse.” She snaked an arm around his back, her other hand coiled around the laces of his jerkin.
His right arm pulled her close as he inhaled her scent, her hair, her skin. He gripped her by the chin to study her face, rendered in shock that she was actually standing in front of him. “Are you alright?”
“I'm fine Jaime.”
“Truly?” He searched her eyes for concealed hurt or fear.
“Yes. I am well. The only thing I needed was you.” She leaned over to softly catch his lips in hers.
“And...the baby?” He whispered.
“Safe and sound in the same place you put it.” Pressing her nose into his cheek, he tangled his fingers in her hair.
She seemed slightly guarded and he didn't understand why.
He knew she could be shy but he wanted to prise her mouth open and give her a proper welcome home kiss. The people of Tarth had grown used to their demonstrative displays after their
engagement duel. *Why her hesitation? And why all the other ships?*

“Do you have my ring?” She nuzzled into his ear, pecking his cheek softly in a way that an intimacy starved man found incredibly tantalizing. *Wait until I get her inside...*

“Not on me wench. It's in our chambers, I wouldn't want to lose it. You caught me by surprise, I was sparring.”

“Hmmm. I thought you tasted salty.” She trailed a few more chaste kisses along his jaw before stopping to look at him. “I've missed you.”

“I have been going insane without you – no white cloak?”

“You noticed.”

“Brienne, what happened? Why....”

She gave him a wry smile and tilted her head.

Jaime heard the soft clomping of boots on the gangplank. He turned towards the sound.

“Hello brother-” Tyrion stepped onto the dock. His doublet was of fine velvet and a circlet of gold ringed his skull.

“-aren't you one for keeping secrets?”

All grins, Jaime released his woman to scoop his younger brother into a hug.

“I'm sorry Tyrion. I did what I thought I had to....” Realisation struck him. “What is on your head?”

“I believe most people call it a crown. Haven't you heard? I am the King.”

Jaime's mouth dropped open in shock. He looked at Brienne to confirm this wasn't a hoax which had been plotted in vengeance.

The Lady Knight simply nodded. “He is telling the truth.”

His head swam. *How can that be? My brother the King...well Tyrion was Hand.*

“I'm not bowing.” Jaime declared with a smirk. “Wait – what happened to Bran?”

“Ask your betrothed.” Tyrion answered cryptically.

“A story for later Ser Duncan. When we are alone.” She gestured to the many helpers who were amassing on the dock. The people of Tarth did not yet know his true identity and clearly there was more to this story. Curiosity burned but he would have to wait.

The King examined him closely. “You have a new scar.”

“Brick.” Jaime offered. “Next time you pick an escape route for a collapsing building, perhaps going further underground isn't the best idea.”

“Fair point. My scar is better though. Axe trumps brick. More ferocious looking.”

“It matters not. Scar or no scar, crown or no crown, I am still the better looking.”

“Is this honestly what the pair of you want to talk about?” Brienne's no nonsense tone interrupted their banter. Tyrion looked chastised but Jaime was used to her. He didn't miss a beat.

“Apologies My Lady.” In two long strides he was in front of her, cupping her cheek and crushing upon her an overtly passionate kiss.

“Jaime.” She hissed at him stepping away, flushing scarlett all the way down her neck. He laughed at her expense.

“Look out Ser Brienne, I think my brother wishes to go mountain climbing.”

Jaime raised his eyebrows at Tyrion in warning.

“I'm not sure I understand....”

“Don't ask.” Jaime advised.

Simultaneously Tyrion stated. “You will.”

He was terribly confused but incredibly happy. His future wife was returned to him, a picture of glowing health and she had brought his other favourite person in the world. His incorrigible little brother. Now King.

*I'm never going to get used to that....*
Out of his peripheral vision Jaime noticed activity on the boat.
Podrick nodded at him in greeting, dutifully following Tyrion.
Ser Davos spoke with a man who was presumably the captain before calling out to Brienne.
“My Lady, I will need to co-ordinate the efforts to come ashore. Can you direct me to the dock
master?”
“I will send him to you.” Jaime felt her strong arm slip around him from the side, he turned to face
her and she bent her forehead to his.
Her low voice caring as she murmured. “I should be asking if you are alright, this is a lot to take
in.”
“Brienne I have absolutely no idea what is going on.” He confessed. “I think its triggering one of
my headaches.”
“Let me organise a few things and then we can meet in the Hall. I will do some explaining.”
Destined

Chapter Summary

Jaime learns how all came to pass....

Chapter Notes

Here I am again, nagging myself for dragging things out but still having so many things I want to do/conversations that need to be had.
I figure, if I've come this far, I don't want to have a single regret! :)
Therefore, I'm taking this slowly over the next several chapters and hoping you guys want to come with me on the ride.
I love every moment and cherish anyone who takes the time to read and comment!
If I could hug you all, I would. <3

As Jaime awaited his Lady Knight in one of the sitting rooms he earnestly hoped they would be alone.
Her reserve with all the onlookers had kept his affections at bay.
He longed for her to regale him with her many tales whilst she sat astride his lap and he could playfully explore every inch of her to confirm she hadn't come to harm.

Sadly this was not to be the case.
His Grace had beaten Brienne into the room, making himself comfortable in one of the plush arm chairs.
Wrinkling his nose as he inspected the prepared cups of tea. “Don't you have something a little more wine related to drink? Tell me this isn't a dry island!”
Jaime sighed. “Of course we do but my Lady cannot indulge at the moment and it was her company I was anticipating.”
If Tyrion noticed his pointed stare, he chose to ignore it.
Brienne and Podrick entered, an expression of resignation on her face as she surveyed the scene.
She feels the same way I do.

“Podrick!” The King seized upon the opportunity. "Go see if you can rustle up something red for me. I will be fine with these two, they aren't like to kill me. Wait...then again.” The personification of his nickname, the Imp gave Brienne the most quizzical look.
“Tyrion.” She spoke through gritted teeth.
These two have clearly been ribbing each other for the whole voyage. The thought of them growing closer was endearing.
If he and Brienne were complimentary opposites, she and his brother were world's apart.

Jaime scooted over on the chaise lounge where he sat, patting the cushion for her to join him.
He could see the tension in her broad shoulders as she tried to relax into the seat.
“These chairs aren't bad.” Tyrion observed, bouncing lightly on his own to test its comfort. “I'm in the market for a new Throne, preferably one that doesn't have blades or wheels.”
Jaime ignored him, smiling secretly at the woman next to him. “Long trip?”
“Neverending.”
He kissed her cheek, placing his left hand attentively on her stomach.
There were too many witnesses to greet his child at the docks.

“I hear you're going to be a Father again.” His brother observed, watching their interaction.
“Congratulations.”
“Yes but hush, it's a secret.” Jaime's stage whisper added to the confidentiality.
“Because you are being so discreet.”
“Leave him be. He is proud and we were very worried for each other.” Brienne placed her hand
over his own, caressing it affectionately. She seemed tired even though it was only afternoon. Her
countenance strained and tether short. “Now Your Grace, thank you for escorting me - but when are you going back to King's Landing? I am sure you are required in the Capital for more important matters and we would hate to detain you from your duties.” I know my woman. He couldn't help but be warmed by how well he could interpret her subtle nuances.

Tyrion chortled. “Did you hear that Jaime? This is how she speaks to her King! I hold you responsible for this insubordinate streak. You have corrupted her fully – in more ways than just your seed.”

Brienne shot proverbial daggers at the impertinent monarch.
“And didn't I enjoy it?” Jaime volunteered. “Though I do get the feeling I am missing something.”

“You have the floor My Lady.” The King leaned back expectantly. Podrick had returned with a chalice of wine and Tyrion sipped it happily. “I wasn't going to miss this.” He gestured for Pod to close the door.

“...Brienne?” Jaime asked hesitantly. He saw traces of shame flutter over her readable face. What has she done?
She took a deep steadying breath. “I killed the King.”
Jaime's eyes widened to saucers. His spontaneous reaction was an irrepressible guffaw. “What?!”
“This is serious.” Her tone was dour but he couldn't help himself.
“You Brienne – you. 'Kingslayer, Oathbreaker, Jaime you're a monster.' You?”
He could see Tyrion biting his lips in an attempt to hold in his own mirth.

“I-I'm hormonally charged. I'm not myself. It was an impulsive reaction and I know it was not an honourable thing to do, but my reasons were sound – Jaime stop laughing!” Brienne was deathly serious.
“My future wife – Kingslayer. We are more well suited than everyone thinks.”
“Don't forget she was already accused over Renly.” Tyrion volunteered.
“Stannis!” Jaime blurted out. “Behind those sapphire blues and that trustworthy exterior hides a rather fearsome history. My sweet swordswench, for all these years I thought I was the one tainting you. But you are thrice implicated in the death of Kings! Now I know why you were worried Tyrion.”
“I know! What can I say, I live life dangerously.”

“Enough!” Brienne's voice sliced through their hysterics. It brooked no argument. “This is not a humourous matter. Your Grace, I would respectfully ask for you to give Jaime and myself some time alone.”

Something’s wrong.
He nodded at his younger brother, encouraging him to leave. Tyrion and Podrick departed without fuss, the sudden gravity shifting the mood in the room.

Jaime curled one leg under him, turning in the seat so they were face to face.
In an instant he transformed from the jesting Lannister into her supportive lover.
“What do you need to tell me?” He took her hand in his own and gave it a squeeze. “It must be traumatic to provoke such a drastic reaction from you.”
She was pensive, he recognised the signs. Reliving an ordeal she would rather forget.
He rhythmically stroked the back of her hand with his thumb as he waited.
*She can take all the time in the world if she needs.*

Brienne controlled her breathing, lengthy intakes of air which she slowly expelled, well practised at keeping herself calm. Slowly she began....

“What you...he was behind my attack at Winterfell. He told me he saw a vision of our son....our babe of Winter. He swore he was never going to let a child of ours live. Not our last and not this one. His hatred towards you ran deep...” Jaime watched her long pale neck as she swallowed, remaining stoic despite the ache. “He killed my Father. He swore you and I would never see each other again. He sought vengeance for his crippling.”

Jaime felt as though he had been submerged in lead. The heavy dense metal seeping in through every pore, every orifice.

Hardening as a solid weight in his veins.
Would he never escape his past? His wrongdoings and evil deeds.
Despite his interventions, the ramifications had still spread to Brienne and Selwyn.
Dragged into a pit of pain and suffering by their association with him.

*How much did I cost them? I am a pestilence, destroying all I touch.*

*Her light, her good name.*

Once long ago he had bargained for her to be left 'unbesmirched' yet every minute spent in his company since had gradually been achieving the same goal. Tarnish was catching.

*If it was not for her attachment to me, she would still have her Father....*

He felt a warm hand pressed to either side of his cheeks, strong splayed fingers cradling him reassuringly. Lifting his face to hers as she had once done in a courtyard, when his self-loathing had threatened to consume him.

“I ended it.” She was resolute. “I pushed him from a high terrace, completing the chain of events which you started in Winterfell. Full circle. Those ghosts of the past can no longer hurt us. It is over.” Brienne drew Jaime into her arms.

She was so merciful, so beautiful of heart. Forgiving and loving, his savior.

Still an instinct niggled in his subconscious mind, it told him she was holding something back.
Where this intuition stemmed from he did know. Perhaps it was his paranoia. Locked in the recesses of his doubtful Lannister brain. That intrinsic self destructive quality, always intent upon decimating his contentment.

Her tone took on a lilt, intending to cajole him from his gloom. “Do you want to know the final words I said to him?” Kneading the back of his head, she didn't wait for a reply. “The things I do for love.”

Despite himself he chuckled. “Very poetic of you wench.”

“Thank you – but its true. I love you. I love our baby. I love what we have. You taught me so much Jaime.”

It was an ironic thought - that someone as immoral, jaded and cynical as he could have imparted wisdom to this idealistic maid. But then, she had changed his view of the world.

So why couldn't he do the same? Even if just in a small measure?

“I love you too.” He held her close, not needing to speak. Absorbing the full scale of their journey. Basking in each other's company.

Oddly enough, it was she who broke the silence. “Our wedding is going to be a fiasco. Half of the gentry in King's Landing is here.”

“A mighty big wedding for two people who thought they would never marry.”
“Tyrion's determined to take over the preparations.”
Jaime sighed. “We are going to need a lot more wine.”

* * *

Brienne lead Tyrion into her Father's meeting room.
In the wake of his sudden passing they had left it largely untouched.
Just as though he were merely off on an errand and would soon return.
Jaime lingered in the doorway, noticing as she took a shuddering breath.
She grieves still. She has pushed it into its place in order to get on with life. But the wound is still raw.

“What wedding plans my Father had arranged can be found in here.” She told the King. “He was well organised so you shouldn't find much that needs doing.”
His little brother waddled behind the desk. The chair was unusually high for him but he pulled himself up, examining the contents of the parchments laid out in front of him.

“This is all very concise. I believe I may have liked your Father Lady Brienne.”
His woman beamed at the compliment. “He bonded with Jaime and you are more studious. It is quite probable he would have liked you as well.”

Jaime placed his hand on her shoulder to guide her out of the room.
He didn't want her spirits to be dampen, they had too much to achieve. “Can we leave you to it Tyrion?”

“Of course.” His brother wasn't listening.
Page in hand, he was already engrossed in what he was reading.

They nodded to Podrick, standing vigil outside the door as they passed.
He was going to have a long wait. Once Tyrion had a task, he found it difficult to place aside.
Belonging

Chapter Summary

Finally some alone time. . .

Finally entering their bedchamber, Jaime closed the door ceremoniously shut.
Turning the key in the lock and letting out a groan. Brienne collapsed in an exhausted heap on the
covers behind him.
The Castellan and Lady of Evenfall Hall had been inundated.
As had all the docks, inns and taverns along the waterfront.

After ensuring the King was safely ensconced in her Father's quarters – the most befitting
chambers for royalty – the duty to assign rooms and arrange their numerous guests had fallen upon
their shoulders.
The household staff were harried and overrun.
The usual quiet meander of their island existence turned into a flurry of demanding Lords and
Ladies.

Their first point of order had been to call a meeting.
All staff, garrison, guards, maids, stablehands and general members of the household were required
to attend until the Square had barely any room left in which to stand.
Jaime had welcomed Brienne back and then invited her to do the talking, stating that as Lady Tarth
had returned she was technically in charge. She had swatted at him in annoyance. “How convenient
– you surrender to me now there is an abundance of work to be done.”

As he watched her begin to speak, he realised too late the reason behind her reluctance.
Although she was confidant in the role of Commander on a battlefield, when asked to play Lady of
the House she was completely out of her element.
Brienne awkwardly stopped and started as she
divulged his true identity, relaying how they had been harbouring him for his own protection. She
made sure to iterate that it was with the full knowledge and support of her Father.

Jaime then intervened, coming to her rescue. If he had forseen how tongue tied she would become,
he never would have subjected her to it in the first place.
By contrast he was fluent at public speeches and undaunted by their watchful eyes.
Delegation and inspiring morale came inherently to him. The Lord instructed them in how they
were going to need all hand's on deck if they were to successfully hold a noble wedding.
The splendour and glory of Evenfall was on display and if each pulled their weight, they would
leave a lasting impression upon even the most discriminating attendees.
There would be no feasts tonight, supper would be delivered to rooms and top priority was settling
their guests after their travels.
After issuing them all with their respective posts, they dispersed to begin managing the invasion.

Jaime had been greeted by people whom he could not remember the name of – blaming his head
injury when truly he hadn't bothered to note them beforehand. Even worse was when he did
recognise acquaintances. They were more difficult to dodge in the long term. Bronn followed him
around, teasing him mercilessly and asking where he could find company and entertainment. The
new Lord of the Reach's idea of leisure was not something Jaime had sought and he did not have
the first clue where to direct the former sellsword. He sent him off to harass Tyrion instead. He had only bumped into Brienne every so often in passing, eventually compelling her to go - bathe, eat and rest. She had travelled far and needed to think of their little one.

Hours later, when the night wore on and the castle quietened he had met Brienne in the hall outside their quarters. Now they could finally be alone.

He crossed the room, flopping down upon the covers beside her. Tired and flabbergasted.

“Did you have dinner?” Brienne reached over to tease his hair.

“No, but I’m not hungry. At least - not for anything outside this room...” Kissing the tip of her nose, he smiled. “When I woke this morning I did not predict my day would end up here.”

“Which part was the most shocking?”

“That would be a toss up between King Tyrion and Kingslayer Brienne.”

“Ludicrous isn’t it? Though I have had time to process those two events. The part I will not get used to is the loss of our privacy. Now we have a castle full of people coming purely to gawk, when I can't even make a speech in front of my own staff. The concept is quite terrifying. I did not want to be nervous about our nuptials but it seems I have no choice in the matter. After my meal, I went to check in on Tyrion. He claims based off my Father's pre-existing preparations, we shall have the wedding within a fortnight. He knows I am....short of time, shall we say.”

“We will get through it. We have faced worse things. Remember the army of the dead?”

“Reanimated corpses might be preferable to some of these courtiers. At least I could cut my way through them.”

Jaime chuckled. She would always be more warrior than Lady and that suited him just fine. He himself would always be more fighter than Lord.

He sprang from the bed to retrieve something from the dresser drawer.

Her face erupted into a radiant smile as she spotted the blue gem in his hand. “My Lady – I made you a promise.” He knelt on the bed and she pushed herself up on her forearms. “I am returning this to its owner, but I must ask....do you still wish to marry me? All things considered; royal brother, ravens with a vendetta, pushy noble takeover....”

“Yes Jaime, If you want to marry a fellow Kingslayer.”

She offered her left hand and he slipped the ring on her finger. “Of course. I just see it as further proof that we are soulmates.”

Taking her chin in his hand, he gently teased her lower lip with his thumb, dragging it down to part them for his tongue. He took his time, slowly leaning in and brushing his lips against hers, drawing out his agonisingly slow seduction before deeping the kiss. She sighed contentedly, reciprocating and looping her arms around his shoulders. Taking away her balance to fall back against the soft covers.

Which was exactly what he wanted.

Enjoying the tactical advantage he trailed his mouth down her neck, nipping and sucking at the junction of her shoulder.

“Jaime-” It was not one of her pleasurable calls of his name. More the voice she used to scold him. He ignored her and persisted.

“Hey!” She tugged his hair roughly to get his attention.

Lifting his gaze, he cocked his head in amusement. “Manhandling me wench?”

“Jaime we have less than two weeks until our wedding and a stronghold full of people. We are not yet husband and wife. It is improper....”

“Didn't we surpass that at Winterfell? Where everyone knew what we were up to? And here, when you flagrantly defied your Father's wishes? Much to my enjoyment I might add.”

“That was different. What use is there in concealing my pregnancy if we make it evident that we lie together anyway? Think of our reputation and what you said about people presuming you felt
obliged. Wait until our bedding. It is what my Father would have wanted.”
“We are in a locked room! They are going to draw conclusions anyway.”
“Our quarters are private. We could have separate chambers within. What if we were overheard? The Southron Lords and Ladies are judgmental. They don't see things in the same 'life and death and everything else is superficial' way that the Northerners do. And even then - they said things about me. I'm tense and pent up, give me this, so I may hold my head high in the Sept. Please.”

He growled and rolled over onto his back. Trying desperately to ignore his arousal. “You drive a hard bargain.”
“I am appreciative. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder....”
“You've been absent and I am already fond. If I grow much fonder I may have to move the wedding to tomorrow.”
She was sympathetic but at the same time he could tell she tried not to smirk at him. “It won't be long Jaime. It can't be.” She bit her bottom lip, holding in something she wanted to say. The desire to confide in him won out. “If you can behave – I want to show you something.”
His eyebrows shot up to reach his hairline. “That sounds promising - if only it hadn't been preceded by your sudden onset of propriety.”
“Can you control yourself?”
“Yes.” He grumbled. Thinking, Probably not.
He had many years of practice at restraint but when it came to her he much preferred satiation.

Brienne unlaced the bottom of her undershirt and the top of her breeches, gently teasing them down to her hips.
“I shouldn't be watching this.” Jaime declared. “You're torturing me for sport.”
She rolled her eyes. “You will survive.”
Parting the fabric to expose her stomach she looked at him proudly. “Can you tell?”
Jaime timidly edged closer, desire slowly morphing into optimistic fascination.
“Give me your hand.” She encouraged.
Lacing her fingers through his own from behind, she guided him across her flesh to where the budding protrusion could be found.
“There.” She whispered.

He could feel it. It was the first time he had been permitted to experience this. The pride, the joy and the excitement. His smile extended from ear to ear as he regarded her with awe. “This is really happening.”
“It is.” She confirmed. “And we don't have much time, before its noticeable to more than just us.”
Jaime nodded, understanding. “You should get some sleep.”
He pulled her back against his chest, fitting her into him as best he could.
Nosing cozily into the crook of her neck.
His sole hand remained pinned beneath her own, held fast between his two reasons for living.

As his eyes drifted shut the fatigue of the last few weeks settled over him. Their breathing synchronised, their chests rising and falling in perfect tandem.
Sleep claimed him quicker than he ever would have expected.
Finally able to settle, secure with everything he loved, safe within his arms.
Check

Chapter Summary

Jaime and Tyrion have a much needed catch up....

“Care to share a drink with your brother?” Jaime enquired, brandishing the pitcher and two wine goblets. “Or are you too busy and important these days?”

“If that's red, I'm in.” Tyrion responded, ushering him into the room. “And you are one to talk about being preoccupied.”

The past few days had been a dizzied frenzy of organising and social commitments. Jaime and Brienne were the man and woman of the hour with their time being demanded upon accordingly. It was stifling his betrothed.

On one occasion he had gently suggested it might be best if she left Oathkeeper in her chambers. The temptation to use it on some of the prattling women may become too much to resist.

No amount of time begrudgingly spent in the company of Margarey's ladies had been enough to prepare her for the onslaught of being a bride.

Jaime had just come from a fitting for his new doublet. The process came easily to him, having been fussed over and pampered his entire life.

Brienne on the other hand was still held hostage in a room by several seamstresses and Septa Donyse. They were trying to come to an agreement on her own wedding attire.

He had chanced to press his ear to the door on the way past, his presence having been banished earlier from the immediate vicinity. Judging from the sounds of exasperation he could hear permeating through the woodgrain, he wondered if there would be bloodshed before this was over.

“It's Dornish Red and I agree entirely. This getting married business is exhausting. I see now why I put it off for so long.”

His brother snorted in amusement. “Between your White Cloak and your penchant for incest like you had a choice.”

Jaime filled both their cups. “I prefer not to think about that anymore. Besides, everything is different when it is the right woman.” He passed the wine to Tyrion, he had learned to do everything in steps and stages to compensate for being one handed.

His sibling’s mismatched eyes regarded him. “You truly do love her don't you?”

“More than words can say.”

“I really misread that situation didn't I?”

“It's not your fault.” Jaime took his seat opposite the new King. “You didn't have a proper chance to see our journey. If you had, it would have opened your eyes. Both Brienne and I are complex creatures, we are good at concealing our feelings.”

Tyrion sipped his wine thoughtfully. “A good year.” He remarked. “I took the liberty of a trip to the cellar, I hope your Lady doesn't mind. Might I say, I'm impressed. A very refined assortment of wine's down there. I never guessed the Tarth family would have a discerning palate. Brienne's reluctance to partake taken into consideration.”

“They don't. That would be me. I buy wine's from the merchants as they come ashore.”

“How do you manage that? Liar's half of them, they'd rob you blind. Don't you have a servant who
can do that?"
“I like the task. You don’t know how I made my way here to Evenfall do you?”
“No, I hadn’t stopped to ponder it. How?”
“I got a job. Paid work. Manual labour. The kind that would make our dear Lord Father rise out of
his crypt just to express his displeasure.”
“Alright, I will bite. What pray tell are you qualified to do?” Jaime watched his brother continue to
savour the Dornish Red and chuckled.
“I assisted a wine merchant.”
“You’re joking!” The delight on his brother's face was intoxicating in itself. His eyes lit up like a
child at the prospect of it. “Did you get to sample the wines?”
“Yes. Regularly. It was part of the job. First I worked out of a Port Town and then aboard a
merchant ship.”
“This isn't fair.” Tyrion mock pouted. “You get to drink for a living and all I get is to be King.”
“You would have loved Gisson. He was your type of person. Liked to laugh and an absolute
pushover. He should actually be returned from Essos soon. He wanted me to go with him but I
refused.”
“Quite the adventure my big brother had. And the whole time I was stuck behind a small council
desk.”
“With my Brienne close at hand. I would have gladly traded places with you.” Jaime hesitated. He
wanted to ask a question but was worried it was a touchy subject. “Speaking of women....”
“Yes?”
“What about you? You're King now. That has to be of benefit when it comes to the ladies. I haven't
forgotten what you said in Winterfell. For you to go so long without a woman is a sobering
thought.”
“Hmmm. 'Sobering' may be the right word.” Tyrion refilled his goblet. “More wine is the antidote
to such.” He sat back in his chair. “What do you mean to ask me Jaime?”

“Have you thought about it? Taking a Queen.”
“Of course. All I do is think. I think and I drink. It’s what I do.”
“You're conclusion?”
The youngest Lannister sighed. “I don’t have the best track record when it comes to Queens. First
Cersei, she hated me. Then Daenerys – grievous lapse in judgment there. And then the reigning
Queen in the North, my estranged wife. Sansa.”
“You can have the marriage annulled though.”
“I could ask the High Septon, in his new position he is keen to find favour and would surely grant
it. There is grounds, the marriage is unconsummated and in my new position as King it would be
unwise of the Faith to make things difficult.”
“It sounds like you don't intend to.”

Tyrion placed his drink aside. This must be serious.
“I am supposing your Lady Knight has told you what Sansa did to her in Winterfell.”
“My betrothed and I have no secrets.”
“Yet you didn’t march straight North to run her through with a sword? That doesn't sound like the
rash Golden Lion of Lannister I knew.”
“Brienne tempers my darker impulses. For the best I might add. Look at how we have all paid for a
split second decision regarding Bran Stark.” Jaime leaned forward conspiratorially. “It did make
my blood boil though. Do not think it didn't. And if Brienne had not killed that vile skinchanger
after what she told me, I would have headed straight for King's Landing and ensured this time I
finished him off for good.”

“Hmmm. My thoughts exactly. Hence my position on Sansa. If you care to hear it.”
“Go ahead. I'm interested.”
“After my time in the North I thought she and I may be on good speaking terms. Though she had much changed from the girl I knew. Now I question everything. I doubt her words. She said to me ‘I used to think you were the cleverest man alive.’ Quite insulting really. She has turned into a game player and from the way she rapidly ascended and won herself a crown, quite a good one.”

“She was taught by Littlefinger. Who better to learn from?”

“Precisely. So where does this leave me as King? Sansa has proven herself an enemy to my family. She killed the child within Brienne, which was mine own flesh and blood as well as yours. My niece or nephew. I do not take kindly to that.”

“One would think this would make you more determined to sever your connection with her...”

“In base terms yes. But in the grand scheme of the great cyvasse game – no.” Tyrion gripped the arms of the chair on which he sat, looking quite Kingly in that moment as he outlined out his tactic.

“Sansa wants the North. She wants her independence and she very much does not wish to be answerable to a man again. That crown upon her head means a great deal to her. She rules now with absolute autonomy. Under the religion of the Old Gods of the North she is widowed, her husband dead – she is free. In the South, in the light of the Seven. She is married. To me. With that political marriage, Queen to King, the North falls back under dominion of the Seven Kingdoms and technically belongs under my reign.”

“She has cornered herself.” Jaime realised.

“If I keep our marriage in play – which I intend to do – it restricts Sansa's movements to entirely within her borders. She thought she was safe with her brother on the Throne in the South but now the status has changed. Of course Sansa could choose to pursue our marriage and style herself at my side as Queen of the Seven Kingdoms – but she won't. When news reaches her ears that you are alive and married to her former bodyguard she will know that I am aware of her crimes. She would be setting herself up for a life answerable to a King who loathes her in a family which she has wronged. After all her strategising she is wise enough to be grateful for what she has. I intend to extend to her this knowledge by way of Raven. Our treaty will be simple. The day she or her forces step even one foot south of The Neck, I will enforce our marriage and legally retake the North.”

“This is – tremendous. Tyrion I mean it. It reeks of your brilliance but....it is a large sacrifice to make. You will be surrendering the opportunity to take a wife of your own.”

“I have had two wives so far Jaime. Tysha was my only real one. We both know that. After what was done to her, I don't feel comfortable being in a marriage again.”

“I will never forgive myself for the part I played in that.”

“You were afraid of Father, in my anger I didn't want to acknowledge it but I accept that now. And you weren't there for the worst part of it. I was. This will be my atonement in a way. I will take lovers, I am sure. A King can't live on wine alone but – I do not wish to remarry. And keeping my vows to Sansa ensures our safety.”

“What about heirs?” Jaime was enrapt in the idea of having his own baby on the way. He hated to think of another opportunity his brother was passing up.

“I drink like a fish and have never gotten a single whore pregnant – for all I know I am unable to father them.”

“That is a ridiculous conclusion, even for you. You should have children - who will take the throne after you?”

“I am the very person who suggested that sons of Kings are perilous abominations. It would be terribly hypocritical of me to reinstate an act of succession. Even if this voting system doesn't seem to be working - it has created two frightfully inapt sovereigns so far....” He glanced at Jaime, intent gleaming in his impish eyes. “It was my original aspiration that the King would remain on the Throne for such a lengthy term that a new generation would be of age to be eligible for takeover. And at the rate my nearest and dearest relatives are going, I will not be left wanting for a suitable successor.”
Jaime started. “Our child? You mean to name Brienne and my baby your heir?”
“Pending my remaining on the throne and the personality seeming suitable yes. Why not? You have already proven fertile twice in just a short time. Give the two of you enough years and you should be able to produce enough offspring for heirs to Casterly Rock, Tarth and my throne. All the while I will get to play lovable Uncle Tyrion with all of the fun and none of the responsibility.”

“Steady on!” Jaime held up both hands in a halting gesture. “Tell me you haven't run this by my future wife?”
“Not as yet. I thought I would leave that part to you.”
“She is just getting over an unfortunate incident with your predecessor, I don't think now is the time to burden her with your ambitions for the contents of her womb.”
“Well keep it in mind. I think the solution suits all of us. Besides there's no rush. We have years to work all of this out. Providing I don't come up against any Kingslayers....”

“Ah!” Jaime pointed at him triumphantly. “Now I know why you won't have children of your own.”
“And why is that?”
“We may be Kingslayers but you killed your own Father. If history repeated it would put quite the dampener on the way you said you always wanted to die.”
“See? My methods are best.” He reclaimed his wine and offered it in a toast. “Shall we drink to it?”
“No. I will not agree to anything without consent from my better half.” Jaime shook his head chuckling. “Nothing is ever simple with you is it?”
Dormant

Chapter Summary

A game of cat and mouse as Jaime and Brienne prepare for their wedding breakfast....

Chapter Notes

So, I started out thinking 'I will write a paragraph or two' but then the poster couple for UST took over and I started having fluffy fun. Actual plot moving forward in next chapter, lol.

If anyone wants to understand my thought patterns when shaping this particular aspect of their interaction, please refer to my detailed notes at the end. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Jaime does it concern you if I choose not to wear a wedding gown?”
Brienne tugged on the hem of her outfit. Turning to the side to inspect the shape of her stomach in the looking glass. It still appeared flat – for now. They were only a day out from the ceremony and it seemed to her they were cutting it fine.

This morning marked the first official lead up event – their wedding breakfast.
It was a concept introduced to her by the Ladies of the Reach and it seemed a pleasant enough ritual, especially now her morning sickness had subsided. Breaking with custom, she had insisted that it be held the day before, in order to have both the men and women congregate in a single room for the exchanging of gifts. She did not wish to be ostracized from Jaime and all her other companions. Which she realised in retrospect - were also male. An interesting result of a warrior woman's life.

Her tunic for today was a rich cream, edged in gold stitching with criss cross lacing at the top. A new article for the occasion and decidedly her style. Anything she could partner with tan breeches made her happy. Hence the difficulties in finding a compromise on her actual wedding dress. Brienne hadn't been spared from the fitting room for a single day over the last week and a half. On each occasion she argued back and forth against the flouncy feminine wants of the seamstresses, insisting they remove the unrequested embellishments and start again. No matter how many times she tried on their newest creation, it never felt right. She suspected the problem was incurable – it wasn't the gown, it was the woman wearing it. It made her feel like a trussed up fool. An actress in a mummer's farce, which centred on a comedic portrayal of a courtly wedding. Where the poor unwitting groom did not realise what an ungodly sight awaited him.

Eternally comfortable in his own skin and completely foreign to how she was feeling, Jaime sauntered past, kissing her neck and declaring.

“You can wear mail and plate for all I care. It's what's under that counts.”
“Be serious.” She batted him away half-heartedly. Fending off his advances had become a full time exercise. Last night she told him she was going to start sleeping with Oathkeeper by her side. Both to hold him to his word and ward him off. “I wanted your opinion.”
“Alright.” Jaime tried unsuccessfully to wipe the grin from his face. “I was really secretly hoping you would wear a fetching little number like that one in Harrenhal. The pink....the satin. Why I can barely contain myself thinking about it....”

“You are impossible!” She huffed. “I am trying to reasonably balance tradition and expectation without turning myself into a complete eyesore. I already know I'm going to be hideous - I don't need to emphasize the fact. Then the thought occurred to me that your take on the matter is really the only one I care about. I don't want to shame you – either by looking ridiculous or by flouting convention. Yet you are dancing around the subject and won't answer me honestly. Just be frank with me Jaime – you generally are.”

“I was the first time - you just wouldn't accept my answer.” He leant casually against the side of the dresser. “I spent years in King's Landing Brienne, attended countless weddings. I have seen showy, pretty women decked out in their satin and frills. I've heard the crowds gasp and whisper compliments as they passed. All their adornments made them appear like an attractive package but it didn't do anything to improve who they are as a person. Look at me – I look like a handsome Knight but my infamy precedes me. All the velvet doublets in the Six Kingdom's cannot eliminate that. I would rather have you make a statement about who Brienne Tarth really is. The first female Knight in Westeros and a kind good woman through and through. Don't pretend to be someone you're not, especially not for their sorry sakes. At the end of the day it won't change their wagging tongues. They are going to spread their gossip either way. There is no need to compromise your integrity. I know who you are and I adore you for it.”

She smiled at him. Jaime's acceptance of her was nourishment to her browbeaten psyche. Especially when it came from a man who used to hurl insults in her direction quicker than he could contrive them. How the tides have changed. “You have a way with words don't you?”

Somehow he seemed to read her thoughts. “Well I have said many comments over our years that were not my charming best.” He pressed his lips to her forehead. “If you want to wear breeches – wear them. If you want to wear a gown – wear a gown. I will say my vows to you just the same. The only thing you should be worried about is covering up our little secret.”

“Fair point.” Having measurements taken whilst insisting upon wearing your undershirt had been another trial. Along with keeping the pesky women away from 'accentuating her waistline.' Purportedly one of the few redeeming features of her female form. Which will soon be gone as well.

She sighed out loud. At this rate I will be left without anything to wear.

“And...” Jaime added. “If you want to get married in armour I won't object – though it will make the wedding night quite difficult. Not that I won't rise to the challenge.” He winked.

“Speaking of which – I'm also opposed to white. It is causing quite a stir but I do not wish to be a fraud. The Sept is a sacred place.”

“You honestly take these things far too seriously Wench. Half the women I've seen wear white are bigger whores than the highest earners on the Street of Silk. Must you blemish your impeccable moral standard over a technicality of timing?”

“Ahhhh, so you do have opinions....” She eyed him triumphantly, folding her arms. “Now your tune changes.”

I should have known that his proud possessive streak would make an appearance.

“Different statement.” Jaime was defensive of his cause. “Far more important meaning.”

“The colour does nothing for me. It's worse than the pink.”

“I emphatically disagree. You took my breath away in your Kingsguard White Cloak.”

“I thought you liked me in another colour....” She was starting to second guess her final choice. Jaime smirked, puzzling out her sudden concern. “Well that other particular colour remains my favourite on you.”
“Stop trying to guess!” Her voice achieved an unusually high octave as a result of both shrieking and chuckling. “It’s supposed to be a surprise.”

It was a curious state of joy that caused her heart to swell whenever they bickered. Never had she thought that disagreeing with someone could be so invigorating. The way Jaime teased and tried her patience caused her body to throb.

She silently vowed to ensure that white was somehow incorporated but she had no intention of disclosing this knowledge to her betrothed.

*Let him think I was testing him all along....*

“Then stop talking about it.” He stated matter-of-factly.

Brienne watched with burning intensity as he walked around their bed, retrieving Oathkeeper in it’s scabbard from the nightstand. “Do you plan on carrying this to breakfast? Or has it been repurposed as an instrument of enforcing abstinence?”

“I simply call it 'Jaime wrangling' and yes I plan to wear it both this morning and to the wedding. That's another point of contention. A bride being armed during the ceremony. Apparently it is neither advisable nor seemly.”

This concept seemed to amuse her lion. “Maybe they just think you are like to kill me rather than marry me.”

Shaking her head she reached for her swordbelt, draped over Jaime's arm.

She was surprised when he swiftly snatched it out of reach. “No...I am your Squire this morning. I plan on helping.”

*Oh I know where this is headed.....*

A tingle of exhilaration coursed through her from deep within.

Exhaling slowly she tried to maintain composure. “Jaime that will take twice as long. We are expected downstairs shortly.”

“Please, Ser Brienne. Do not judge me by appearances, it is disparaging to underestimate my capabilities and write me off as a useless cripple. I am offended by your insinuation - so now you must let me.” His tone did not match his words, hinting at an entirely different sentiment as he motioned for her to turn around.

The Lady Knight acquiesced, her pulse quickening as he slipped his arms around her from behind. “You had to use the cripple line didn't you?”

She could observe his every reaction in the looking glass, unable to miss his provocative stare or the familiar crinkle at the corners of his eyes as he toyed with her.

His breath blew hot as the midday sun against her ear, his talented mouth mere millimeters from her skin. Fleeting ghosts of contact, skimming against her as he spoke. “Need of such measures, just reflects the importance of the goal.” He pulled her flush against him, still continuing with the pretence of struggling with the buckle. “Do you doubt my skills My Lady?” They both knew he wasn't referring to the belt.

The timbre of his husky voice called to her base carnality, lying latent in a sequestered quadrant of her soul. She had hidden it there for safekeeping, nurturing it since they last parted.

*Patience....she tried to quell its fervour. Save it for when you are wed.*

Jaime's beard tickled against the sensitive skin of her neck as he nuzzled behind her ear.

Anticipations of pleasure materialised themselves as gooseflesh, prickling her surface and making her long for him to drop the leather strap and run his hand along any area exposed to his touch.

Ser Goodwin had schooled her to have patience and perseverance. From her earliest of trainings as a warrior. Surely this was much the same - let him press his aim and tire. Let him spend his strength....
Her lion practically purred. A low, continuous vibration of enjoyment, resonating from deep within his throat. His unique mating call, which every fibre of her body felt compelled to answer. This was vastly different from anything she had been taught. In the pursuit of satisfaction, Jaime only grew more eager and she felt her own dedication wearing down, the original stance to which she held so staunchly fading further into inconsequential oblivion. Despite herself she leaned further into him, knowing that if what she could feel bulging against her was any indication, their prematrimonial pact was in serious jeopardy.

She walked her fingers down his right arm, tenderly caressing his stump. Even though Jaime would not admit it, she knew he was truthfully unable to thread the belt. At least not without using his teeth. He had risked the embarrassment of the discovery to instigate this foreplay with her. The knowledge spurred her to recklessness. Surely he realised she felt the same way about his lack of hand as she did about her lack of femininity? It was irrelevant to her affections. Brienne softly traced the puckered scarline, throwing her head back against his shoulder. She was rewarded with the blessed contact of his mouth against her skin. Closing her eyes to savour each sweet brush.

For over a week she had kept him at arms length. She dare not let him this close to her when they lay beneath their sleeping furs at night. To have her already abed and in reduced clothing would have been an unfair advantage. Never finding the will-power to refuse them both what they desperately desired. Though I am failing at denying him now...

A moan escaped her, betraying her thoughts and intentions. She faintly heard the swordbelt land with a thud upon the carpet. Felt Jaime's hand slide up and beneath her tunic, only to become impeded by its superior quality and tailored fit. The garments she generally wore hung loosely upon her, having been intended for a more masculine frame. Brienne tried not to laugh at how simply he had come unstuck. Venting his frustration through passion, he intensified his ministrations upon her neck. One nip of his teeth was all it took for her to call an immediate ceasefire. “Jaime! That will leave a mark.” She pictured the neckline of her wedding attire. “It will show tomorrow.”

His reflection gazed back at her, eyes hooded and clouded with want, his voice throaty. “Good. I want everyone to know that you're mine.” He squeezed her tightly. “I miss you.” She knew in what regard he was referring. “I know – I miss you too. We've come this far....”

He spun her around to face him, a distinct Jaime conflict warred upon his handsome features. Weighing his choices between right – stepping away to honour her wishes and......oh so alluring irresistible wrong – persisting in his persuasion. Unrepentent in the pursuit of his craving, she need not wonder which urge would win out.

“I've never been with a Kingslayer before...”

She grinned at his predictability as his mouth came crashing upon hers, his hand tangled in her hair. Encouraging her in a rebellion against her own rules. But part of what he admired about her was that when he chose wrong - she chose right.

She pried her lips away, notwithstanding her own yearning. Her voice rasped with desire as she answered him. “You know who I have never been with before?” His teeth tried to unravel her laces, just as he had the first night she arrived back on Tarth. She was undeterred. “My Lord Husband. And I will be.....tomorrow night.”
“We'll go to the Sept right now Wench.” He kissed her again. Knowing what they both wanted. Using his knowledge of her preferences to make her weak at the knees. The flurry of sensations were getting to be too much. “One more day.” She pleaded. “One more day.”

With a guttural groan he stepped back. The removal of his warmth felt like ripping off a layer of her own skin. Flaying and excruciating.

Jaime ran his hand over his beard, he was not used to losing. “Stubborn, pig headed, obstinate wench.”

“Back there again are we?” She pinched her lips together to suppress the glee. He is rattled, he expected to win. “I'm the only one who's allowed to say it. I reserve that right as your betrothed as it is said with affection.” Brienne watched him try to regain his cavalier demeanour. “Alright Lady Tarth, let's get on with our day. All the sooner to bring forth tomorrow.” He offered his arm. “Shall we?” She appraised his appearance, letting her eyes linger on particular areas of his physique. “You best stay here for a while I think....” Correcting and straightening her own state of dishevelment, she added. “And I have some errands to run.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi readers! It has come to my attention that this chapter and its predecessor (Belonging) may warrant an explanation. I often forget that people do not have a window into my overthinking mind so sometimes will be left wondering what cognitive leaps in logic I take. Therefore allow me to shed some light (and I have quite a few reasons as always, lol).

We all adore J/B chapters that contain love scenes (they are nearly always my favourites!). However I want to emphasise how much deeper their relationship transcends beyond the physical. The purpose of this fic was to negate the negative aftereffects of the show. In the series J/B's emotional connection is overlooked after they go to bed - it turns to focus soley on the sexual aspect (from the first scene to the heavily implied), without any love or dialogue shown in between. It troubled me how much this mimics Cersei (where there was little to no bond beyond sex).

Jaime and Brienne were defined by their Unresolved Sexual Tension for most of the series. Their bond is profound built upon mutual respect. Therefore I felt the need to emphasise that although they want each other (badly) they do not rely on sex as the basis of their relationship. For these two chapters I instead focus on themes of family (with their baby and Jaime getting to experience being a father for the first time) and mutual acceptance (the dress and the stump).

Now from a narrative sense. Brienne is going through a very emotionally vulnerable time. Her father's death, coming to terms with Kingslaying and adjusting to her pregnancy. Then factor in that her tranquil home has just been invaded by the viper's of Kings
She was already nervous about the wedding, as she does not like being put on display to be judged. She remembers her Father's wishes strongly and would not want to bring disrespect upon him (she is very anxious about her baby being discovered). To have forged a moralistic reputation (in this medieval-esque setting where virtue is emphasised) and have it shot to pieces in the final fortnight would be devastating. The courtiers of King's Landing are unlike the more practical people of the North (who face constant death, Wildling's and freezing temperatures). They are two faced, hypocrits who will gladly slice you to ribbons if you give them fuel for fire. Therefore she asked to abstain for the little under two weeks pre-wedding.

Furthermore...on the flip side of the coin both our warriors are physically driven. They crave the adrenaline rush of both fighting and fucking. They both know that this game will heighten anticipation and delight in testing each other's will power. Brienne always wants to challenge Jaime to be the 'good man' and do what is right. Jaime always wants to test Brienne's scruples and resolve, trying to get her to bend them.

It is essentially a two week long foreplay (which when compared to their five plus year drawn out seduction in the beginning, is not that long to wait, LOL). Meanwhile thanks to the wonder of writing and time jumps, we don't have to wait that long at all! Yay!

I hope this assists anyone who was wondering. :)
Brienne listened to the soft lapping of water against the dock. The calm ripples of the harbour mirroring the cerulean of the sky. They blended seamlessly upon the horizon and if it hadn't been for the glimmer of sunlight upon the oceans surface you would think they were a single infinite entity. This had been her destination after issuing her final set of requests to the seamstresses. She patiently waited as the Admiral of the Swiftwind guided her honoured guest across the gangplank. Glad of the smooth conditions for them.

Deciding upon a wedding gift for Jaime had been a taxing task. Her man had been raised in splendour and had never wanted for any item in the material realms. The only thing she knew he lacked from those times of the past, was the nurturing of his tender heart.

Whilst in the clutches of his aloof, cutting Father and manipulative Sister he had been rich in pretension and finery but poorer than a baseborn in Flea Bottom when it came to affection, support and respect.

When Brienne had asked Jaime what he would like for a wedding gift, he had humbly stated. “You and our babe. It is all I’ve ever wanted. Love, family and someone to call my own.”

It's simplicity and beauty was so raw it made her want to cry. There were none of his customary jocularity or subtext. He spoke straight from his soul.

But that would not do...he already had her. In every essence, in every way and she too felt blessed to have him in return.

Yet still he insisted upon showering her in favours and tokens. Habits acquired in that previous superficial existence. As though she could not feel his adoration unless it was expressed through grandiose displays. She had decided in that moment that her gift would be more spiritual. A gesture which may bring warmth to those vacant spaces inside him which his Father should have filled.

The thoughts of it made her nostalgic for Selwyn, but she could be content knowing she was loved.

Whenever Brienne met someone new, she tried to brace herself for the inevitable expression of disappointment. One of the reasons she favoured being a 'Ser' over a 'Lady' was that it set expectations to a more reasonable level. Encountering her when preceded with Lady was always a shock to the system.

She watched the elderly man shuffle down the dock, deep in conversation with the Captain. She heard him offering his thanks.

He seems kind.

The Admiral presented him to her with a flourish. “May I introduce Lady...” Inwardly she cringed. “...Brienne Tarth of Evenfall.” “Thank you.” She nodded in dismissal and the Admiral excused himself. “Maester Kennock, I appreciate you making this journey.”

There was no scorn in his countenance, just a genuine smile plastered upon his leathery, weatherworn features. “It is my absolute honour to be asked My Lady but please, if I may say – call
me Melj. I have forged no Chainlinks which I can claim and I would not offend your own Maester in residence.”

“Of course...but while we are on the topic, I myself have a Knighthood and find Ser much more preferable.” Already she felt at ease in his company, deciding to start their conversation in an upfront, honest manner.

“A great achievement indeed Ser Brienne. I myself have never put much stock into titles but I can see how earning such an honour would mean a lot to you.”

“It does.” She felt a swell of pride in her own accomplishments, a luxury which often evaded her.

“Mae- Melj.” She corrected herself before she sounded like Podrick. “I intend to escort you up to Evenfall Hall myself, pray tell me your preferred method of travel. I can arrange a wagon or horses....”

“Walking suits me just fine. I can stretch my legs and enjoy the fresh air – it keeps me limber – but I wouldn't wish to burden you by asking you to keep pace with me.”

“I insist. You are my guest. We shall take our time.”

They began their stroll, Brienne steering them in the direction of a suitable path.

“Are you not expected at table?”

How did he know that?
A lucky guess or something more? Jaime had mentioned this curious talent. Perhaps it is merely a deduction, it is breakfast time after all.

“Yes, but as I am the guest of honour they are obliged to wait on me.”

The elderly gent’s gaze was bemused and she grinned. Forgetting rank and treating him as an equal, she confided. “Though I would be quite content if they started anyway.”

“Do you not enjoy the company of the Court?”

“They are an acquired taste. I'm not certain whether it is I who have little inclination towards them or...whether they just haven't developed a liking for me.” Why am I being so candid?

“Call it the ramblings of a senile old man but I believe people should be measured by who they include rather than who they shun.”

“I can appreciate that.”

The most subtle of breezes ruffled her hair and fluttered her clothes. It was serene. She knew in the breakfast hall there would be nattering and conspiratorial whispers behind hands. Malicious intent veiled beneath ingratiating pleasantries and self promotion. She did prefer being out in the verdant wilderness.

“May I enquire about my former patient?” There had been a lull in their conversation.

“Certainly, he is the reason I asked you here.”

“Your letter was most inviting. I was beyond pleased to receive it. Often I do not learn the outcome of those who mend and move on. I knew he had arrived at his destination due to the word sent along with the generous patronage of Lord Selwyn. But...your man was a special case. Both in his injuries and his purpose....” The fellow's mouth twitched as though he were weighing up his next statement. She did not know his character well enough to read its meaning.

“....I confess I never officially learned his name was Jaime. When you wrote to me of him, it was neither his true name nor his alias which revealed his identity.”

She angled her head to the side, wordlessly requesting more information.

“It was your name which I recognised. He called it countless times whilst he was healing. Many of which I doubt he remembers. Your name became a beacon of hope to him, pulling him from the darkness. Calling to you from a place betwixt the netherworld and convalescence. At first I misheard it but eventually it became clear. Never have I had a patient so enamoured that it became transcendent.”
Brienne felt a warm blush spread from her neck up her cheeks. She looked to the ground, bashfulness overcoming her. The idea of Jaime loving her that much...it choked her up. Clearing her throat she spoke. “Your presence here is a surprise of sorts for him.” She volunteered the information as a means of changing the subject. Shifting the focus from her. “I knew how much he cared for you and I thought it may please him. We are to be wed upon the morrow.” “I am very happy to have made it on time.” “Your attendance will not only mean a lot to Jaime but to me....” Exposing her feelings remained a challenging venture. “.....you saved....” Her eyes welled and she tried to blink it away. “....you saved the man I love. Without you – he would no longer be in this world. Without you - there would be no wedding tomorrow. I can never thank you enough.” He was gracious and modest. Reflecting her praise with quiet humility and pretending not to notice her weakness. For a few minutes they continued on in silence.

Spying a particularly pebbled patch of path ahead, the Lady Knight gently took Melj’s arm. Stooping from her towering height to guide him. “Be mindful of your footing. It is uneven here.”

“You too should be careful of your steps.” He smiled benevolently. “You are a warm-hearted woman. You try to hide it, but I can tell. I suspect you try to hide many things....” Another one of those knowing gazes. Deliberating his choice of words. “Forgive me if I am out of line, a fellow of my age worries little about what fate may befall him for speaking out of turn but might I ask a private question?” Curiosity and gratitude made her grant permission. “Please speak freely.” “How many moons turn until your baby is born?” She stopped in her tracks. “Just under six, how did you...?” “Do not fear. We have had many mothers-to-be at the Infirm. It is only from experience that I noticed.” Her concern must have been palpable. “I do not judge in any way, I only asked so I could give you my blessing and make sure you look after yourself, as much as you see to the wellbeing of others.” “It must be kept a secret.” “Discretion is a given but with your consent, I should like to congratulate the Father when and if we are granted a private conversation.” Brienne knew she had made the right choice in bringing Melj here. “He would like that.” “The two of you make a good match. I tried many times to imagine his counterpart. Now knowing you for only a short time I can see it clearly. You are similar.” She was taken aback by the observation. “No one has ever said that to us before.” “Truly? Both of you are brave, strong, capable of great love yet at the same time fear yourselves unworthy of it.” He shrugged. “I’d say it’s quite obvious.” His insight gladdened her in ways she couldn’t define. They were well suited to each other. Everyone had always been determined they were opposites attracting but the way Melj put it, they fit like a glove. It was just the sought of thing a woman needed to hear the day before her nuptials.

* * *

“That is truly and quite remarkably unoriginal.” Jaime’s smile extended from ear to ear as he taunted the former sellsword. His eyes ablaze with merriment and gall. In contrast to her earlier predictions, Brienne was enjoying their breakfast immensely. The long tables had been arranged in a continuous square, commanding the majority of space in the enormous sunroom. Positioned on the far side of the stronghold, glass paneled windows dominated from floor to ceiling, providing unobstructed natural light and a breathtaking view of the rolling expanse of the island beyond. This was complimented by the indoor foliage, creating vibrant splashes of green against their carved marble pots.
The tables were simplistically draped in white linen cloths, laden with food and beverages.

“I’m Lord of the fucking Reach...what do you want? I ran it by a woman, she thought it ‘twas a good idea.” Ser Bronn had told them of his wedding gift. A shipload of flowers would be arriving from Highgarden later in the afternoon, fresh for the ceremony tomorrow.

“Why Master of Coin, that is a rather understated present for a man of your wealth.” His Grace sat next to Jaime. “Do tell, what was the occupation of the woman whose opinion you so entrusted?”

Tyrion had carefully arranged the seating so that all their comrades were close at hand with the worst of the lickspittles relegated to the farthest corners of the room. Brienne was exceedingly grateful for his wisdom.

The Lannister brothers both leant forward on the tabletop, mockingly intimidating the Lord of the Reach. “Bet you a dragon she was a whore.” Tyrion suggested.

“Double or nothing says her name is a flower.” Jaime countered.

“You're on...Bronn – fess up. There is a financial arrangement riding upon it.”

“Fine. She's not a whore, she serves drinks in a tavern and really likes tips from the Lord Paramount, went by the name of Posy.”

“Pay!” Jaime pointed at his younger brother.

“That is not technically a flower - it is a bunch of flowers but as it is your wedding celebrations, very well I concede.”

Her betrothed turned to her in triumph. “Now it is a cargo load of flowers and two gold dragons. One for each of us.” Beneath the table he gave her leg a quick squeeze, only able to take his hand away from sight for seconds before it became conspicuous.

Always courteous, she remembered her manners. “I am sure the floral arrangements will be beautiful. Thank you Ser Bronn.”

So far they had received a myriad of gifts.

The lesser Lords and Ladies had been the first to present theirs, working in an opposite order to what was usually appropriate. It had been another of Tyrion's brainwaves, getting the strangers out of the way so then they could sit and relax amongst friends.

Regardless of his inability to attend, Samwell Tarly had sent her a beautiful leather bound notebook and calligraphy set, having heard of her fine penmanship in the White Book of Brothers.

She intended to record pregnancy milestones in it, so they could always remember each moment. Podrick had selected her a stunning white Courser, the parchments decreeing its pedigree slid shyly over to her in a sealed envelope. It awaited her in the stables. He told her that one day she could ride it in a tournament now she was a Knight. The thoughtfulness of her former Squire was touching.

Sipping her cup of tea, she drummed her fingers on the table. Listening to one of Ser Davos' many smuggler stories. She laughed along, an inner peace settling over her. Jaime's hand covered hers upon the linen, lacing his fingers between her own. Displaying their attachment in full view of the room. He nodded to her subtly, reassuring her it was alright. They could be tactile, tomorrow they would be wed. *It's finally here....*

She heard a throat clear and turned to see Melj enter the room.

Brienne had sent him to change and rest, telling him to join them when he felt ready.

“Jaime...” She gave his hand a squeeze to grab his attention. “My surprise for you is here.”

He looked like an excited child. “You got me something? Where is it?”

“He.” She amended, gesturing towards his healer.

Jaime’s face softened the instant he spotted the elderly fellow. Rushing from his seat to greet him.

The Lady Knight sat back and watched as her lion welcomed him with a hug. Reading the questions on Jaime's lips, she could feel his happiness.

*How have you been?; I didn't know you were coming!; Thank you for coming all this way; Was your journey alright?; Did you meet her? My Brienne?*
Whenever he said that her heart skipped a beat.

“Who is that?” Tyrion had leaned over Jaime's seat.
“The man who saved his life.”
His Grace was reflective, reliving his brother's close shave with death. “I will have to speak to him later. Give him my thanks.”
“His name is Melj. We shared a chat upon his arrival. He is quite the unassuming gent. We had better ease him into a conversation with the King.”
“I will wait. Is that who the spare place setting is for?”
“Yes.” She smiled as Jaime returned to her, Melj trailing slowly behind.
Her man crouched down to be of eye level with her.
“Thank you. I never thought I would see him again.”
“You are welcome - from the minute you told me the story, I knew you should meet again. Our wedding just gave me an excuse to bring it forward. He is an incredible person.”
“He is very fond of you.”
“Really?” She felt the blush begin to burn again and fidgeted in her seat. The admiration in Jaime's gaze wasn't helping matters.

“I got you something too.” He winked, rising up to fetch it.
On the way he checked that Melj had settled in his seat.
Brienne had requested the spot next to Podrick be left open. She believed it was a good choice. Ser Davos had been another option but she would have them seated together for the wedding.

Jaime returned with a sizable box under his arm. The majority of the plates had been cleared away and she shifted her teacup, allowing him to deposit it on the table in front of her.
“You needn't have.”
“But I did.” He hurriedly surveyed the room and pressed a chaste peck upon her forehead. “I want you to wear it tomorrow.”

Now she was intrigued. Opening the box, her breath caught in her throat.
A gloriously crafted swordbelt and scabbard were within. The leather had been gilded and shone a brilliant gold. Tiny cutout patterns created a delicate affect which would allow the fabric beneath to show through. Solid gold studs pierced the leather and co-ordinated with the golden buckle. The scabbard itself was girded by fine goldwork, a filigree cage supporting the leather and reinforcing the sheath. “It is gorgeous.”
“Lannister gold.” He smirked before loudly adding. “It is your future husband's request that it be worn with your sword for the ceremony.” It worked. He had caught the attention of the room.
“Oathkeeper must witness our vows My Lady.”
She nodded, studying the finery, utterly captivated by its beauty. Pretending to reach for the box, Jaime whispered in her ear, “It will disguise something else as well.”
Her eyes widened. Of course. It would obscure the view of her swell. Covering and masking it. He masterminded the whole thing, even the part about assisting me this morning....
“I adore it. You are brilliant.”
Jaime just nodded, clearly chuffed.
She knew his thoughts. Yes, my lion. A far cry from stupid.

“What of the other half?” Tyrion enquired.
They had clearly worked on this together, to produce something so exquisite in such a short space of time.
“Other half?” Brienne queried.
“I had a second, far plainer one made for me as well. I wanted us to match – if you don't mind. It is upstairs.”
“I would be happy for us to look a couple. When else but our wedding day?”

“Your turn Jaime.” With a motion to the staff, Tyrion signalled a box brought forth. “I went all out with this gift, though I do suspect you will like it.”

Puzzled, the Knight looked to her and shrugged before lifting the lid.

“You found it!” He exclaimed.

Brienne peeked over. She would know the red and black ripples anywhere, the golden pommel. In her mind’s eye she saw Jaime flex his grip upon the hilt as she knelt before him, about to become a Knight. Raising her hand to his shoulder she smiled for him. “Your sword - it’s Oathkeeper’s twin.”

“Widow’s Wail.”

“Can't have you both in co-ordinated swordbelts without your matching Valyrian steel.”

“Well you are right, I do like it. Very much. This sword and I have been through a lot together. It is a maker of Knights.” A pointed glance in her direction. “And a protector of Maidens.”

“One Maid.” She emphasised, reliving Jaime cutting through the Wights, them falling before the might of the spellforged steel.

“But – unlike others I am generous.” The King puffed out his chest. “So there is a second gift for the two of you. Ser Davos and I give this together to the happy couple.”

The Hand of the King pushed a small wooden model ship over the table. “Congratulations again. You look very happy. It's a grand thing to see.”

“A toy ship brother?” Jaime probed.

“No.... a miniature replica of the stately one sitting in the harbour. Be it for pleasure cruising or for visiting altruistic relatives.”

Brienne lifted the carving studying it to ascertain the features of the life size version. “This is fantastic.”

She passed it to Jaime for him to inspect. “Just tell me there isn't oars involved?” Her golden lion furrowed his brow.

Tyrion ignored his jibe. “Your harbour master told Ser Davos that you sail Lady Brienne...”

“Since before I could ride a horse. I will look forward to it. Thank you sincerely Your Grace, Lord Hand.” She nudged her betrothed, who was still checking for oars on their sailing vessel. She had to elbow him again in the ribs.

He started before realising. “Thank you.” Jaime said flippantly.

She rolled her eyes. It feels like we are married already.
Bells

Chapter Summary

Jaime and Brienne's Wedding.... Pt 1 – The Ceremony

Chapter Notes

It's finally here! This is a long chapter but we have been waiting for this moment so it had to be detailed.

This chapter title is dedicated to Crimson_Lady who made the suggestion to me, which I wholeheartedly appreciate as I love the full circle aspect. Thank you, it is very fitting!

I wrote her entrance into the Sept with the 'White Book' playing in the background and henceforth in my mind for the ceremony. It made me want to cry but now when I hear it, I see them clearly as I have written them. If you want to do the same, you will know the moment to press play as I mention the music.

I was delighted to find the passage from the Seven Pointed Star which I used as a reading.
It is canon, from the books and was perfect!

I find it providential that I am publishing their wedding on the two month anniversary of me starting this fic. :D

Smoothing the fabric of her skirt, Brienne took a deep breath.
In the absence of a steadfast female influence in her life, the task of helping her dress had fallen into inconsequential hands.
She let their fussing and prattling wash over her and simply flow away.
The further engrossed in her own thoughts she became, the more it reduced to mere noise.
A steady buzz in the room and nothing more.
I am marrying Jaime today.
It was serenity which overcame the butterflies in her stomach.
Her whole life she had been guided by her gut instincts, an internal compass steering her towards her true path. Sifting through the mayhem and mires, leading her in a predestined direction.

This is right.
She knew it.
Every trial, every struggle, every insult, every tear had been angling her towards this moment.
The Lady Knight could envisage the shadowy tread of her footprints far behind her, traversing Westeros, each step a decision that culminated in her being here.
Where she was meant to be.
Today they would belong to each other, in sight of Gods and men.
A commotion broke through her state of calm, the surge of noise by the door attracting her attention. In a steady commanding voice she stated. “Let her pass.”
The small slip of a girl had little trouble circumventing the guards. That is what happened when your Father was their Captain. But the ladies in attendance were another matter.
Brienne smiled welcomingly at the fiery creature who approached her. “Hello Nessa, have you and the boys found a spot?”
“Yes Ser. It wasn’t easy. There are lots of important folks.”
“I told your Father to ensure there was space.” She bent down to whisper. “You are our friends, we care more about you being there than half the guests.”
The child twinkled. “I wanted to come see you.”
“I am glad you did.” It was true. “Did you visit Jackanapes?”
“Yes.”
“How does he look?”
Nessa shrugged. “Alright I guess.” Brienne chuckled, the girl still existed in a world where boys were pals and sparring partners. Annoying lackwits she knocked into the dirt. The idea of anything more attractive about them was as repulsive to her as a toxic poison. “He told me, to tell you – if you’re wondering where to meet, he’ll be in the Sept.”
Thank you Jaime. She tried not to roll her eyes. “That sounds like him....is he happy?”
“Yes. He is with the King. They are having a wine.” Figures.
“How did you get to see him if he is with the King?” Her former Lady Commander intuition piqued. That is not very responsible.
“It wasn't hard. I just talked to the oafish one.”
“Who?”
The dopey Kingsguard who nods a lot. I told him, I know Ser Brienne personally, coz I'm gonna be a Knight one day, like her. Then I said, I'm friends with the groom too, we go way back - so its fine.” Podrick.
She didn't know whether to laugh or swear. He would be easily outmaneuvered by Nessa's wiles.

“The King gave me a task.” The little Spitfire - as Jaime called her - fished a folded parchment out of her pocket. “It's instructions.”
Brienne took it carefully. “What are the instructions for?”
“The ceremony. His Grace said he's changed a few things and to read the note upfront. He gave me a silver but I'm not gonna tell the others that. I'm not stupid.”

“Run along child!” One of the women waved her hands flustered. “You are holding up the preparations – Lady Brienne she is going to make us late!”
With a sigh she acquiesced. “Thank you Nessa.”
“No problem, I gotta go get my position anyway.” Scampering toward the door she looked back towards her idol. It was the first time a shy expression had ever crossed her face. “Ser...you look beautiful.”
The child ran before the Lady Knight could respond.

Flattening out the parchment in her hand, she removed the separate note from within its folds.

______________________________________________________________

Ser Brienne,

The following alterations to a traditional wedding ceremony were not of my creation.
I instead have arranged it following the instructions left by your Lord Father. Please know his wishes and spirit are incorporated into your marriage....
Her eyes welled.
Selwyn couldn't be with her on this day - yet he would still be included.

A loud chiming rang out from the Sept, the first tolling of the bells.
Summoning her to Jaime's side.

* * *

Standing in front of the eminent statue of the Father, Jaime shifted his weight from foot to foot. It was imperceptible to the onlookers but helped him to feel at ease. Anticipation soared in his veins as he awaited his Lady Knight, keen for her to take her place in front of the Mother, at his side.

The Septon stood reverently, his eyes closed in prayer.
Sunlight streaked through the high glass windows, illuminating them in a heavenly glow. The pillars were decorated with masses of wildflowers and trailing greenery. Sprays of delicate blue and red blossoms amongst the tiny blooms of Queen's lace. Banners hung proudly between each column down the length of the aisle, the sigil of Tarth alternating with the Lion of Lannister. A third standard hung still rolled, one in the middle on both sides and a third behind the alter. He wondered briefly why they hadn't been revealed. Jaime's gaze swept the crowd, seeking the location of his brother. Tyrion gave him a reassuring grin.
Earlier as Jaime had slipped Widow's Wail into the scabbard at his hip, the wise King had pointed out to him: “You know, never before have two Knights been wed. You are well within your rights to bend the rules.”

Jaime flexed his fingers upon its hilt. His nervous habit. He knew somewhere not too far away, Brienne was probably thumbing Oathkeeper's pommel. His luxurious velvet doublet was deep Lannister crimson – the first occasion he had been back in his favoured colour in a significant amount of time. The buttons chasing their way down his front were solid gold. His breeches a rich cream samite which shone with golden thread as he moved. The plainer version of the belt and scabbard which matched Brienne's was fastened around his waist. A pair of boots had been fashioned in the same leather to compliment it, with a slightly thicker heel than was customary. He had japed with Brienne in the week prior, asking if when they ordered her own footwear they could be made flat. He had no intention of leaping to reach her lips for their first kiss as man and wife.

The crowning glory of his attire was the cloak which flowed from his shoulders. An elaborate masterpiece of riches and regalia. It too was of a deep vermilion, its hems etched with fine golden piping. Lannister Lions roared their ferocity from the corners, their eyes set with rubies. Its clasp was simple to operate so Jaime would not fumble. He appreciated the consideration.

The Septon seemed to awaken from his commune, signifying to Jaime that it was time to begin. Happiness swept through him. I am about to marry my wench....

“We have gathered here in the light of the Seven, in this our sacred Sept to unite two houses, two souls and two lives. Please bow your heads in prayer as I recite a reading from the Seven Pointed Star.....” The Septon raised his hands into the prismatic beams of sunshine.

“The Father reached his hand into the heavens and pulled down Seven Stars and one by one he set them on the brow of Hugor of the Hill to make a glowing crown....”
Tyrion has chosen this passage.
“The Maid brought him forth a girl as supple as a willow with eyes like deep blue pools and Hugor declared that he would have her for his bride.”
Jaime pictured her shining sapphire orbs. This is quite befitting.
“So the Mother made her fertile....” He tried very hard not to snigger.
“And the Crone foretold that she would bear the king four-and-forty mighty sons.”
The Three-Eyed Raven did foretell it and I wonder how Brienne would feel about that many children?
His thoughts came at a rapid pace, an indication of his excitement. He would recall every aspect of this day until the end of time.
“The Warrior gave strength to their arms, whilst the Smith wrought for each a suit of Iron plate....”
That is us.
Pure and simple.

Music swelled around him. A deeply romantic melody to accompany the arrival of his bride. It touched his soul and moved him almost to tears with its strains as their journey played in montage through his memory.
The crowd turned as one to witness her entrance as Jaime watched on in rapt captivation.
His brave Lady Knight had insisted upon walking herself down the aisle. Brienne would not let anyone take her Father's place at her side. And she did not believe that any individual had the right to present her to him – but her. She was giving herself to him, of her own volition. He had won her hand and heart.

Brienne was a sight to behold. It made him radiant, his smile dazzling.
The throngs of spectators blurred and faded away, until his focus consisted solely of her. Completely enchanted by his woman as she made her way towards him.
Her dress was plain but elegant in its simplicity. It did not need further adornment, the colour spoke for itself. A sumptuous cornflower blue which made her astonishing eyes vivid and utterly diverting. Its sleeves were fitted, ending in a 'V' in the centre of her hand, drawing attention to the ring circling her finger. Her neckline was another 'V' dipping not too low but accentuating her pale elongated neck, making him imagine running his mouth down her in ways he should not admit to in a holy place. Gold buttons which echoed his own trailed to her waist, where her belt and scabbard safely ensconced Oathkeeper and shielded her even more precious cargo from prying eyes.
Her skirt was the real marvel. It cascaded in loose folds from her waist, designed not to restrict her movement. It the front it fell to just above her knee, ending no longer than her typical tunic but gradually it gained length in the sides and back to train on the floor after her.
A clever compromise. Well played my love.
Her samite breeches were of the same fabric as his own and her chosen footwear – boots – also matched the leather of her belt. Clearly Tyrion intervened there. He made sure we would look a couple without us even knowing it. Jaime was delighted to note that her heels were low to the ground, equalling out their height.
The cloak which wrapped around her shoulders was intricately embellished. It's top layer a crisp white, proclaiming to all assembled that she had been his Maiden. The edges were bound in gold with the Sunbursts and Crescent Moons of Tarth needle-pointed by hand along the rims. From the flashes he could see as she moved, the underlining was azure blue.

As she drew closer their eyes met, locking onto each other and conveying the innermost beatings of their hearts. So much could be transmitted through their mutual simmering intensity.
A small smile played on her lips, more discreet than his own.
He knew that he should breathe, should swallow, should move.
But he was lost in her sapphire depths, robbed of words and basic function.
Enthralled by his Warrior goddess as she took her place at his side.

The Septon lead them through a series of prayers and hymns. The vocals of the crowd undulating in precise tempo. Brienne recited the responses to the passages in her low breathy octave, the voice she only used when she was overcome with emotion or desire. When the candles were lit, their reflection danced in her iris and he could see the watery quality of brimming tears.

He swallowed past the lump in his throat. Choked by words which the structure of the ceremony prevented him from saying.

He would tell her later. Over and over again. Until she grew tired of his declarations and compliments. But still he would continue. Making sure he had chased away even the smallest fleeting shadow of a doubt that she was the epitome of everything that love could possibly mean to him.

“Ser Jaime, you may now cloak the bride and bring her under your protection....”

Her adept fingers made swift work of the simplistic buckle, unlatching her Maiden's cloak from her shoulders. She draped it over her arm in preparation for him.

Jaime undid his catch with his left hand, removing the crimson cape. He wanted to shake it ritualistically, making it billow for her but knew it may slip from his one handed grasp.

As he arranged it around her broad frame, she caught one end of the clasp. Knowing intuitively when to assist him without being asked. She held it steady for him as he clipped it into place. Admiring her swathed in his House colours.

He would guard her with his life. Fight for her with all his might. Every last drop of his blood, every ounce of breath would be dedicated to her.

“Ser Brienne, you may now cloak the groom and bring him under your protection....”

This is new. He liked it.

Everything had started for them with a vow for her to keep him safe.

She had been his captor and protector once. Now she was again.

For his heart was most certainly her captive and he knew she had the strength to protect him like no one else ever could.

The Lady Knight reversed the direction of her cloak, shifting the white to the interior.

Revealing an azure blue work of art. The gold accents remained but the imagery changed to the complete sigils of Tarth, one in each corner just like his own.

Her hand lingered affectionately on his shoulder as she fastened it around his neck.

They stood the inverse of each other.

One in blue cloaked in red. One in red cloaked in blue.

Of a height, their chests rising and falling in unison as they felt the metaphoric strengthening of the invisible ties which had bound them for years.

So perfect was their symmetry.

“My lords, my ladies...we stand here in the sight of Gods and men to witness the union of man and wife. One flesh, one heart, one soul, now and forever.”

Jaime took Brienne's hand in his, caressing her affectionately with his thumb as the Septon wrapped the golden ribbon around their joining.

The Septon then raised the Sacred Crystal high so it caught the light streaming from outside.

It fractured the rays into a brilliant spectrum of Seven colours.

Displaying the divine presence of the Gods, settled here amongst the mortals, to consecrate and seal their vows.

“Let it be known that Lord Jaime of House Lannister and Lady Brienne of House Tarth are one heart, one flesh, one soul. Cursed be he who would seek to tear them asunder.” He paused for
impact before continuing. “In the sight of the Seven, I hereby seal these two souls, binding them as one for eternity.” Jaime made no move to release her hand, even as the ribbon was elegantly pulled away. He just continued holding her in the only way he could, feeling the warmth of their connected palms.

“Look upon each other and say the words.”
Jaime had never been more ready to promise his vow.
Turning, he faced his beloved Brienne. Her open readable face awash with feelings, smouldering just below her surface. She blinked slowly, trying to clear the tears of happiness, relief and unbridled joy. He understood, they pricked at his own. *I love you so much*....
Jaime tilted his head and she nodded once.
He gripped her hand, signalling for them to begin speaking as one....
“Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger....” Invoking all Seven Gods to hear this, their most earnest oath.
With fluidity they moved as one on a battlefield, with synchrony they writhed in passion amongst their sleeping furs and now simultaneously they swore their undying devotion.....
“I am hers and she is mine....from this day, until the end of my days.”
“I am his and he is mine....from this day, until the end of my days.”

The Septon gestured to him. Jaime knew the final line was his.
His voice was raw and deep, speaking privately to her. “With this kiss, I pledge my love.”
Moving in he claimed her lips, gently taking them in his own. Letting the kiss softly linger as she leaned into him, placing her free hand against his cheek. It was not passionate for he would not embarrass her. But neither was it chaste. The tenderness and closeness they emanated could leave little question that they were anything other than a love match.
He didn't want to step away or break their contact – he could stay in this moment forever. *We have our whole lives*.... The thought heartened him as they parted lips and he pressed his forehead to hers.
Breathing her in for one long inhale.

Hands still clasped, they pivoted to face the crowd and were greeted with thunderous applause.
Behind them a banner unfurled, along with two more further down the aisle, unveiling a new sigil. The Blue and Red quadrants formerly representing Tarth alone, now included Golden Lions, roaring alongside the Crescent Moons. They could only beam at each other as the Bells of the Sept rang out, clear and clean. Announcing their matrimony to every living creature within hearing.
Merriment abounded as the revelry stretched into the evening. Guests crowded around tables in the Greathall, fires burning brightly in the corners of the room. Jubilant music played, alcohol flowed and raucous laughter reverberated, bouncing off the walls and rafters.

She halted a server who moved to refill her chalice. “Apologies I do not imbibe.” “Give her an inch in the bottom.” Jaime interceded. “We can water it down. You can't go our whole wedding without at least one proper toast.” They leaned in close to hear each other over the cacophony. “One? I think several have been made. I saw Ser Bronn toast to our bedframe! Something about it holding fast and true.” The series of toasts had gotten increasingly more ribald - that was the point when she had tuned them out. Nothing was going to disrupt her joyous mood. Their smiles had not shifted for hours, her cheeks ached from it. Brienne genuinely wondered if she could die from excess happiness.

“Well see he is drunk.” Jaime chuckled, walking his fingers up the length of her sleeve. “And I said ‘proper’ of which there hasn't been any.” Her glass was topped up with water and Jaime handed it to her before seizing his own. “To us – my Brienne, my Wench, my Wife.” Her heart skipped three beats that time. “May we live unnaturally long lives filled with love, swordplay and passion.” “To us.” She clinked her cup against his. “That I will drink to.”

She took a small sip, whilst Jaime swallowed a mouthful. Clanking his goblet back on the table. “For tonight at least...the last part is my favourite.” Obscured from view by the oaken table, he ran his hand boldly up her thigh, nipping suggestively at her exposed neck. “Jaime...” She blushed. “They will see.” “We are married, it is allowed. Everyone is preoccupied and besides – those that did see anything aren't like to remember anyway. Look at them.”

They both turned to survey the celebrations. Podrick looked ready to pass out. Melj and Ser Davos were deep in conversation.
Bronn staggered around making advances on serving girls, telling them that Lord Para-MOUNT was another title which he earned.

“Jaaime.” Tyrion's speech slurred slightly as he slung his arm around another man's shoulders. “Haas I told you that I love this man!” Red sloshed from his goblet as he gestured enthusiastically. “This right here is a great man! Worthy of a Lordship!”

Jaime was unabashed in his mirth.

Lord Gendry had arrived that afternoon, having sailed over from Storm's End to join the festivities. He unfortunately had missed the ceremony but had been forgiven as he managed to locate an old friend of the groom....

Gisson had brought with him a shipload a wines from Essos and Dorne, which had instantly been purchased by the King for an overly generous price. Since that moment they were firm friends, hastily making their way through the wares. “Your Grace isss the bestest monarch, we 'ave ever seen!”

“He! Here!” Tyrion raised his goblet, sinking back into his chair defeatedly when he found it empty. “More wine!”

Even she had to admit they were amusing. “Good-brother I would very much suspect you have had an abundance of wine.”

Jaime pulled her close, slipping an arm around her waist. She leaned her forehead against his shoulder, planting a peck on his upper arm. He is mine....

“Very well then - a game!” The King declared. Brienne groaned in mock distaste. Jaime seemed more inclined. “Well I quite enjoyed where your last game lead....” He raised his eyebrows at her and she pretended to ignore it. “What shall we play?”

“I gave you a ssship. It needs a name...let's all make shuggestions. I'll sstart.” Tyrion hiccuped and squinted to concentrate through his inebriation. “Rolling Mountains.”

“It's a boat. You cannot name it after something on the land.” Jaime countered, this joke seemed to be a recurring theme amongst the brothers. “Waaves can be mountainous can they not? Why alllll tall things can....even people.” The King had cracked himself up, dissolving into laughter.

Bronn quickly caught on to the game. “The Happy Seamen.”

“No!” Brienne blurted out. “No, way in the world.”

“But ya got the gist of it didn't ya?” The Sellsword called her out on her turn of mind and she huffed. “Lusty Lions!” Did that come from Podrick? She glared at him. “Sorry Ser.” He mumbled apologetically.

She felt Jaime's hot breath against the shell of her ear. “You know this is only going to get worse as we draw closer to our bedding....” He kissed her cheek. “I'm starting to see that.”

“Brother! You haven't givensus a name.” The Imp's speech continued to run together. “I know you can comes up with one. Lets see if you can maake your Lady blussh. Bys order of the King!” He slammed his hand upon the table in emphasis.

When all attention in the room honed in on her, she could already sense the heat of their stare turning her neck pink. He hasn't even said anything yet.

To her delight, her man looked at her for permission before agreeing. She waved her hand. Go on.
Jaime reclined in his chair, affecting his cocky persona.
“I think – I would like to call it 'The Wench'...” He glanced at her, his eyes shining lasciviously.
“...Because then I can climb aboard her often.”

The bawdy crowd hooted and Brienne buried her face in her hands. She could feel the redness of her cheeks burning through her palms. Jaime rubbed her back affectionately. “It is all good natured my love.”
“I know.” She breathed. In this room she actually felt supported - in a terribly improper lurid way.

“Tyrion!” Her Knight shouted a challenge, coming to her rescue by shifting the focus of the masses. “Let's see if you guffaw as loudly when the boot is on the other foot. My Lords, what can we find to tease him about?”
Ser Davos cleared his throat. “His Grace is very disappointed in his titles. Perhaps we need to find him new ones.”
“Right!” The King cleared a spot to stand on the table, he swayed but maintained his footing. His Crown tilted comically to one side. “I am ready for my coronation, again.”

The submissions came from all directions.
“King Tyrion the Imp!”
“Drinker of Wine!”
“Fucker of Whores!”

Jaime tugged upon her arm. When she spun to face him they were nose to nose. “Come My Lady Wife...before they remember the bedding. I am the only person who is ever going to be tearing off your clothes.”
He took her by the hand and they slipped from the table unnoticed.

He lead her down the halls, through the twisting walkways of her childhood home, corridors that she knew so well. It was an almost ladylike sensation to walk with her skirt trailing behind her across the cobbled floors, her fingers entwined with the man she loved. “This is not the direction to our bedchamber.” She observed.
“I know.” Jaime was alight with mischief as he guided her along, stopping to push open a pair of double doors with his back.

The grand ballroom of Evenfall Hall was just as she remembered it. Though most times she would arrive here being dragged, kicking and screaming by Septa Roelle. The polished marble floors mirrored the sconces on the walls as the flames licked and twirled in place. Jaime barred the door behind them so they wouldn't be disturbed.

“What are we doing here?” Her voice echoed in the empty space.
“I'm not ready to retire just yet. It is our wedding and I want to enjoy some time alone with my bride.” Walking to the centre of the room he smiled invitingly. “Join me Brienne.”
Her boots clicked against the glossy surface as she bridged the distance, bewitched by Jaime's quixotic behaviour. She came to a stop just in front of him. “What now?”

Her lion shook his head and chuckled. “Why Lady Lannister do you have to question everything we do?”
_That's the first time he has said it. We share a name._
She ignored the thrill that coursed through her, hastily reminding herself that the Tarth line could not end with her just because she wed a liege instead of a vassal.
“Jaime, we have not settled that yet... and we just abandoned our wedding feast. Our guests will wonder where we are - they may come seeking us especially when it is evident we are not in our quarters. Besides you made it very clear how keen you are to get to bed....”
"We have all night." Jaime touched his forehead to hers, his voice husky. "Relax...be in this moment with me. Our duties are done. This time is for us."

Abruptly walking away he disappeared from her view, leaving her standing in the vast vacant space.
Feeling cold for want of his company.
Brienne called out hesitantly after him. "Jaime...?" Her heart race increased.
Sometimes I cannot predict what he will do next.

A romantic symphony filled the empty air, unseen musicians weaving magic through their strings and pipes. Calling forth deep affections and giving sound to emotion.
Her Knight returned, holding out his hand. "Dance with me."
"Jaime, I don't dance." Her awkwardness prevailed over his enchantment.
"There is no one watching Brienne. Only me.” He beckoned with his fingers as she shook her head.
Old phobias raising their ugly faces and snarling at her clumsiness.

He knew of course.
"I do not care if we misstep or if we are less than graceful. I want to dance with my wife.” Pouting he added. “You danced with Renly.”
A familiar phrase sprung to her mind. “You sound quite jealous.”
This time he answered plainly. “I am.”
A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth and she extended her hand for him to take.
He kissed it with a grandiose flourish which made her roll her eyes at his showy nature.

Jaime drew her into his arms, wrapping his right around her waist and pulling her close.
The fingers of his left hand laced with hers as he pressed them to his chest.
Brienne could feel his heart hammering against his ribcage. Quickening at the contact with her.
She draped her free arm around his shoulders, glad they had divested themselves of their cloaks earlier, as he rubbed his cheek against hers.
His beard grazed her flesh, kindling within her a delicious agony.

They swayed gently as he whispered to her. “I have not had the chance to tell you, how spectacular you look tonight. I could not be more honoured or proud to have any woman on my arm as I am to have you.”
“It is hard for me to believe you...but I do.” She confided. “I can only understand as I know you judge yourself just as harshly, as I do myself. When in my eyes, there could never be a better man or anyone else for me.”
“We were very misunderstood individuals before we found each other, weren't we?” Brienne nodded in agreement sighing. Both at his words and his closeness.
She adored the way his voice hummed against her skin as he spoke. “Yet now we make a harmonised couple. Ironic isn't it?”
“I prefer to think of it as destined.”
Jaime nosed her temple, inhaling the scent of her hair and murmuring contentedly to himself. She raised her spare hand to stroke the back of his head as she watched the torches waltz alongside them. Deep in thought about their road.

Samwell had presented a book written by an Archmaester.
It had been called A Song of Ice and Fire - a poetic summary of the events of recent history.
But it occurred to her how much the title reflected them too...
Their relationship was this paradox.
Their love was fire and ice.

The man in her arms clad in his doublet of searing red.
His passion and fervor for love and for battle had lead him down a path of impulse and recklessness.
Burning his way through life, with little thought for the ashes left in his wake.
His inferno had raged out of control, unstoppable.
Destroying all he touched, until eventually he realised that he was swallowed by his own flames.

She in turn was garbed in blue ice.
Building herself an impenetrable fortress of coldness.
Protecting her against the words, slights and barbs which sought to chip away at her.
Hardening herself to love and possibility, encouraging her to keep people at arm's length.
Closed off from accepting that she too deserved happiness.

When ice meets fire there are mutual burns, for both can cause great pain.
Her coldness cut straight to his core, forcing him to look at what he'd become.
His blaze engulfed her with truths she did not wish to hear.
Her ice unleashed shards, piecing his heart.
His fire scorched her soul.

Yet then a miracle....
Her glacial walls cracked around her, splintering and disintegrating against his relentless heat.
Melting as they tumbled down, washing over him and dousing his flames.
Dampening them to a flickering light of hope.
Leaving them both warm and wanting that which only the other could provide.

Brienne kissed her Lord husband, an ardour fueled demonstration of her overpowering love for him.
Jaime met her with equal vehemence, deepening the kiss to a level of intensity which transported her to a higher realm.
One that consisted of solely him and her.
“I love you Brienne. I will say it a thousand times until you know it. I love you.”
“I do know it....I love you the same way.”

* * *

The crisp coolness of the sheets swiftly warmed beneath her back.
Her collarbone bedecked by countless kisses, trailed from behind her ear to the dip between her breasts.
Gold buttons merely a trivial obstacle, ripped loose by impatient warriors' fingers.
Flying whichways with their urgency, clattering unseen to the floor.
Perhaps never to be found again.
Teeth and tongue employed at length to claim and suckle upon her.
His possessiveness of his mate endearing, though in the near future her big cat needs must share his spoils with his cub.
For now though they were his alone.

Laces – *Oh to slice straight through them.*
A swordsman had little patience for anything she could dispense of with a blade.
If only she were armed with more than just insatiable hunger.
The criss-crosses trapped her in their snare and kept her from freeing him.
Suspense was their only redeeming quality. Drawing out the process and steadying their pace.
Requiring slow deliberate acts from her fingers as they brushed against his straining fabric.
Hindering the task with his bulging eagerness, only encouraged further by her efforts. For hers, he used one hand and a mouth. A move that gradually transformed her initial laughter to piteous yearning whimpers.

They were happy to bid farewell to the last of their clothing. So many fittings and preparations for slightly torn garments, tossed aside with little regard. *What did my Knight say yesterday? It is what's under that counts....*

Brienne agreed. She could not comprehend how women could place such emphasis on satins and silks, when nothing could feel as rapturous against her naked skin as her new Lord Husband. His weight and fevered flesh bearing down yet chiseled muscular arms holding him just aloft above her. She knew how to snake her own hand around his stump, helping him maintain his balance when his left was gratifyingly otherwise occupied. His chest tasting of sweat and salt and something uniquely him.

Euphoric moans escaped her parted lips as she welcomed him into her core. Exhaling bliss through a melody of sighs and notes, that could only be elicited through his body upon her, within her.

When had this awakening begun? Her transformation from demure maid to a sensual woman who trembled at the Kingslayer's touch. The man she had once shunned. Now she said his name more times in a day than she had ever uttered her own over a lifetime. But she relished forming the syllables. In the throws of their love and covers it was the only word she knew. The rest of her consciousness blinded by a mist of ecstasy, recognising naught but him. Incoherent to anything other than his lips, his hand, his....

“Jaime, Jaime, Jaime....” She panted in a chant, tightening the grip of her thighs around him. It was a prayer, to him, to the Seven – oh the virtuous generous Gods who had lead him into her life and today proclaimed them unified. One heart, one soul, one body, one flesh....*we surely are that now.*

With him she would share everything, give him all that she was. Her pleasure, her pain, her darkness, her light, her torments, her cravings.... Greatest fears and private needs divulged only to him. Her husband.

*Husband....* a new word to utter she had nearly forgotten. He hadn't though. “Wife...my wife.” Jaime's beard raked her jaw as his kisses bruised with fervor. Sinking deep with each roll of his hips. “I love you. Brienne – I love you.” It pushed her over the edge and she gasped in spiraling pleasure. The timbre and sincerity of his voice was more necessary to her than breathing. Once she thought she should never hear it again and it fractured her into a million irreparable pieces. Solely by his return she had reformed, become whole once more and now its resonance was a basic need, more important than food or shelter. She relied upon those sounds, soft murmurs in the dead of night, reminding her that he slumbered beside her. That this was not a dream. The call of her name across a practice yard, preceding his golden smile. Eyes sparking at the sight of her. And now his groans and rhapsody of desirous declarations brought her to completion. “My Jaime....my husband.”
Chapter Summary

The honeymoon begins...

Chapter Notes

Hi Readers!
You may have noticed that I have updated the chapter count – we now have a definitive number I am working towards.
I have the chapters mapped out. We are on the home stretch!

Unfortunately I have a grueling work schedule in the next few days.
It pains me to say this as I have never let my 'chapter a day' rule down (not with a shocking cold or agonising migraines or serious sleep deprivation, all of which have joined me at some point on this journey, lol) but I feel I will not have the time in the coming days to continue my usual pace.

The chapters are coming. I will never abandon you – especially not now. It just might take me two days or so to post the next chapter. I don't want to forget a detail or miss something that I had planned because I am overtired.

Please stay with me! I would hate to lose you all now.
You know I love every single person who spends their time reading my story and I will reply to your heart melting comments tomorrow. <3
Stay tuned....

Light filtered through the balcony doorway as Jaime opened his eyes to married life.
His new wife tangled around him in all her naked glory.
Chuckling to himself he rearranged the sheets, prompting her to squirm in annoyance.
She folded herself awkwardly in her sleepy state, trying to fit with her head resting beneath his chin, in the crook of his neck. A feat which would have been far more easily achieved by a finer, shorter woman.

As she nuzzled into him her hair became snagged on his beard. Blond tresses sticking to his lips and tickling his nose. With his one good hand pinned beneath her, there was little he could do to remove them without waking her. Quietly he tried to blow the strands away, puffing out air which made them fan and resettle, now more determined to land in his mouth.
“What are you doing?” He felt the movement of her brow furrowing in irritation. They had a late night and sleep was very important to her during these early months of pregnancy. “Having an unscheduled breakfast.” 

Eyelashes brushed against his neck as she woke fully. Pushing herself up on her arms as she realised. “Sorry.” “I told you – lusty nights seem to energize your hair.” She groaned and flopped backward on her own pillow. Shielding her face with her arm. “None of that wench.” He lifted her arm away. “We are married now and you haven't been a blushing maid for a long time.”

“It's not you – it's our castle full of guests. Jaime I can't face them. They all know what we did last night! It was hard enough in Winterfell.” “Then we'll stay here. It suits me plenty.” He crawled up to her and kissed her lips. “I rather think that's what we're supposed to be doing.” “The whole day in bed?” To her it seemed a self-indulgent concept. “Ponder it.” He smiled as he pictured the incomprehensibly clean slate stretching out before them. “Nothing to run from. No one to fight...” “No throwing up.” She added wryly. “It's warm...” Jaime had truly detested the freezing conditions of winter. “…Gods – is this contentment? I never thought I would know how it feels.”

He rolled over onto his back, pulling her with him. The pillow cushioning behind his head, beckoning with promises of napping and waking, loving then repeating. A Lions favourite pastimes. Brienne traced lazy circles upon his chest. Tickling his sensitive flesh and keeping him awake. He knew being idle wasn’t in her nature. Soon she would be like to seduce him just to have something physical to do.

“You know....” He mused to entertain her. “Most couples go on a wedding tour. Escape to distant cities or an idyllic island – but we are already there.” “Only we have half the court to join us. How intimate.” “Brienne you are more courteous than I. Help me frame this....how do we nicely tell them all to go away?” “Me? I'm blunt.” She laughed then, sending waves of warm air across his flesh. A sublime easy sound he had come to treasure. Flinging her long leg over him she peppered his torso with kisses. Stirring his groin and the blood in his veins to wakefulness. “You my Lord Husband, can be in charge of enabling our guests earliest possible departure and I in turn will take command of seeing you are well taken care of.....” Her kiss was liquid molten, hot enough to melt Valyrian Steel into a viscous puddle. Under its heat, his mouth, his body, his actions were malleable to her every whim....

* * *

By the time Jaime surfaced, it was presumably afternoon. An odd time to seek to break our fast. Both he and his wife had worked up a healthy appetite, which this time actually required food to sate. While he was gone Brienne had finally surrendered to a satisfied slumber. She had tried heroically to stave it off but their child within her depleted her endurance and pulled her eyelids closed.

He moved as inconspicuously as he could to the kitchens, requesting two trays to be brought to their quarters. Staff had been banned from entering their corner of Evenfall Hall unless strictly allowed by either himself or his Lady.
The actual number of people who were up and about was significantly less than he would have imagined. Encouraged by this discovery, Jaime decided to stretch out his limbs. Wandering to the Greathall, he scanned the lunchtime fare in case any morsels took their fancy. Seedy guests milled about, most quiet and subdued. Surfacing slowly from their rooms and warding off various after-effects of their intoxication.

One of which was Tyrion. He sat at a corner table, pinching the bridge of his nose and studying a parchment laid out in front of him. Ser Josmyn stood guard, large dark circles under his eyes. Perhaps a tad too much merriment.

“Good day to you brother.” Jaime cheerily trumpeted on approach, making the King wince. “Not so loud.” Tyrion assessed him. “What are you doing out and about?” “We got hungry.” Straddling the bench, he plonked himself down. “And you?” “I would still be in bed if I had a choice. A raven arrived from King’s Landing. Two in fact.” Since the death of Bran, the ban on the messenger birds had been lifted for convenience sake. “Should I be concerned?”

“Depends on how you view it. I received a response to my treaty from the Queen in the North.” Jaime furrowed his brow. “Is it good news?” “Mainly, though very political. She accepts my terms in part but counters with her own. The same rules are to apply to me as to her. Myself or my forces are not permitted on Northern soils, lest it be viewed as an act of war. She suggests we meet in the not too distant future to ratify the terms. Queen Sansa advocates Moat Cailin to act as the mutual grounds, though I would prefer somewhere further South.”

“Where are you thinking?” “I will propose Seagard. If we are to Summit, then the Iron Islands should be present as well. All three independent nations must be represented in order for it to be valid.” “It sounds promising.” Jaime shifted in his seat. “Why do I feel there is something you're not telling me?”

Tyrion sighed. “I had no intention of passing this on today but then - I did not expect to see you.” He produced a second letter, sealed with the insignia of House Stark. “It is addressed to your wife.” Frowning Jaime took the envelope. Smacking it against his stumped arm repeatedly as he contemplated his options. “Now it's your problem.” The King grimaced apologetically. “Tossing it in the fire is an option.” Standing he exhaled deeply. “How I wish I could.”

* * *

“That took longer than anticipated.” Brienne sat down upon the bed, straightening the ties on her robe. She had already been and fetched the trays, honestly surprised that the food had beaten Jaime back to their chambers.

“I stopped to speak with Tyrion.” As her husband turned from closing the door, she noted the pensive expression on his handsome face. “What's wrong?”

“I don't want to interrupt our happiness but...” He brandished an envelope held between two fingers. Brienne turned her head to view the seal. Stark. “....what were we saying this morning about tranquility?”

“We jinxed ourselves.” She huffed. “It's addressed to you...but I can destroy it.” He volunteered the last part hopefully. Keen to eradicate the intrusion upon their peace. Extending her hand palm up she said. “No, give it here.”
He held it high, keeping it just out of her reach. “Are you sure you want to do this Brienne?” She nodded, placing her other hand protectively over her stomach. “It may afford me some closure.”

Jaime handed her the envelope and alighted on the mattress beside her. “Whatever it says,” he kissed her shoulder. “We will deal with it. Together.” Brienne broke the seal, comforted to have Jaime by her side. Reassured in his solidarity. Tentatively unfolding the parchment, she began to read. Their were no doubts to the authenticity of the correspondence, it was writ by Sansa’s own hand. The Lady Knight recognised the telltale loops and precision of her penmanship.

_____________________________________________________________________________

My dear former Sworn Sword, Ser Brienne Tarth,

I write that title presumptively - for by the time you receive this correspondence it is with high likelihood that you style yourself instead as a Lannister.

I will not deny that I was most disconcerted when the news of your pending marriage reached Winterfell. For many hours I walked the ramparts, weighing the implications of your union with the Kingslayer and the new light which it sheds upon our final interactions. I acknowledge that ill blood formed between us and that our parting was not on best terms.

The man to whom you subjugated yourself had been an enemy to my family. From my perspective it was irreconcilable how you could swear yourself to me and maintain an attachment with him. I believed your vows to me to be the most devout but I see in hindsight’s shadow that I was mistaken. The moment you stood to his defence in the Greathall, an iron wall was forged between us. For a choice was made – and you chose him. I do not pretend to comprehend your motivations or the finer intricacies of such emotions. The irrational compulsion which drove you to demean you position and honour for Jaime Lannister.

Moreso that I know he abandoned you, cold and desolate to seek the comfort of his sister. Yet you build a life with him in the South? Taking him back, this time as your Lord husband. The wisdom you claimed to have attained in the courtyard of my stronghold, seemingly forgotten.

My whisperers tell me you were complicit in a plan. That your agreement in assertions of his duplicitous nature were not issued in truth. This context makes my former observations mistaken.

It is rare that I am blindsided. But I am not incited to anger by this knowledge. Instead you have acquired my renewed respect. Congratulations on playing the game. You read my tells correctly and I failed to see through yours. It seems I needs must practice.

I know now that I cost you. Ripped your babe from within your womb. For this we are mutually at fault – mine for misreading and you for playing me false. But recriminations are fruitless and so separately we will endure. For what it is worth – you were a faithful bodyguard and a true friend. I will never forget that I owe you my life.
I vow to you in return, no further interference.

Sincerely,
Sansa Stark
Queen in the North

_____________________________________________________________________________

Brienne released a breath she did not realise she had been holding. Jaime studied her face intently, watching for a reaction.

“Well – she is hardly contrite. But it is...enough.” Collecting her thoughts she continued. “Not enough for me to forgive her but enough for me to feel released. I will never forget, part of me will never stop mourning. But we can put it behind us Jaime. We must. Our future demands it.” He kissed her forehead. “As you wish my Wife. You know I would do anything you asked.”

“Anything?” She cuddled into him, letting the letter fall from her hand. She need not touch it again. It was over.

“Yes.” Her lion reiterated, willing to please. “Just name it.”

She smirked. He walked straight into that.

“Did you find out when everyone is leaving?”

* * *

Standing upon the docks, the wind combed through their hair and snapped at their clothes. A blustering gale blew mightily from the East, whipping up sand from the beaches and stinging their eyes with salt.

The perfect conditions to set sail for the mainland.

“I apologise for leaving so soon.” Tyrion's voice was raised higher than usual, but still it was carried off in a gust. “I must organise this Summit. The sooner the better.” He and Jaime exchanged a knowing look. Where the King went – the court followed.

“We will visit whenever we are able.” Jaime crouched to hug his brother. “And you can come here. It might be easier. You know with-”

Brienne could not hear the end of the statement, but she suspected it had something to do with the contents of her womb.

“Just try to keep me away!”

Brienne leant down as well, scooping the King into a hug of her own. “Thank you Your Grace. For everything.” She knew he was smart to enough to figure out her underlying meaning.

“You are family – think nothing of it. And take care.” Releasing Tyrion she called out. “Look after him Podrick! My good-brother is under your protection now.”

He bowed slightly with a smile. “Of course My Lady Ser.”

A fleet of ships dotted the harbour.

The Lord and Lady watched them depart, sails billowing, hulls slicing the water as they were carried with great speed.

Her husband encircled her in his arms from behind, kissing her neck. “We need to get out of this wind.”

It sent a rush of exhilaration coursing through her. Now we can truly start our married life. She did not want to squander another moment.
The hypnotic song of scraping metal drew her daily to the square. 
Sizzling with the adrenaline charged vigor she knew the wielder absorbed through their naked steel. 
Every jar, every impact. The blade an extension of your body. 
Her muscle memory retained phantoms of the vibrations. 
Occasionally they rippled through her, triggered by the sound of a particularly aggressive strike. 
It called to a yearning deep within that waged a constant war with her maternal instincts. 
Maester Bextor had told her no – raising her arms could choke their babe in its own umbilical cord. 
Rest is what she needed. 

Her lifestyle had adapted in the months following their guests departure. 
Borne by necessity and fluctuating needs. 
It was with an envious spirit she had first begun her vigil in the practice yard. 
Sneaking down to watch her Knight instruct the castle guards when she was supposed to be napping. 
A new daily routine of observation rather than engaging. 

“Why do you torture yourself like this?” Jaime had asked her one afternoon. 
He was perched on a table edge in the armoury, attempting to polish down Widow's Wail. 
Balancing it precariously against the scuffed leather vambrace on his right arm. 
Brienne wordlessly came to his aid, easing one leg between his knees and holding the blade steady. 
This was the majestic beauty of their marriage. She instinctively knew when he needed assistance and was too proud to ask. Likewise, he had observed her sullen expressions and withdrawn demeanour as she watched him duel. Heard the edge in her voice afterwards, as she offered critiques on his footwork and stance. 

“I need to contribute Jaime, in some approximation. Each day I forsake my sword I feel like I'm denying a part of me. I thought by being nearby I would feel involved, that perhaps being on the sidelines would quell some of the longing.” 
“Do you not know yourself better than that?” He had smiled at her sympathetically. “Because I do. Knighthood is in our veins Brienne, it's who we are. Watching without joining in must be killing you. I understand – I went through the same when I lost my sword hand. It just took time for me to relearn. You're going to be no different. Once this babe is safe in the nursery and not in your womb you will be carrying our first child again.” 
She smirked, knowing he was referring to Oathkeeper. 
“You know I'd never try and stop you – not now if you really wanted to and not in the future either. You're my Swordswench.” He winked, trying to charm her out of her doldrums. 
She did know it. Jaime had never been anything less than supportive. He had not even dared to hint that she should desist for their babe's gestation period. It had been her choice.
Brienne had taken Widow's Wail from his lap and placed it aside, drawing his hand to her mouth. Kissing his knuckles one by one, then his palm. His skin tasted earthy and metallic from its contact with the hilt. She savoured the heady flavour, mingling with his salt and pheromones. For a length whilst she spectated it had not been the techniques which drew the focus of her gaze – it had been her husband. His cocksure leonine confidence. The raw masculinity of his muscles as they rippled beneath his jerkin. His prowess....

Jaime had once said he only felt truly alive in two activities in life. With awakened awareness she could fully understand how he drew the parallel. She had closed the distance between them like the starving lioness she had become, setting upon him in an impassioned frenzy. Clawing at his leathers, sucking and biting at his lips. Her teeth raking his beard and sure deft hands tearing at his laces. Her animalistic hormones screaming for this release. Her warrior's lust hungry for a way to expend her excess energy.

They had mated right there in the armoury, amidst the weapons and dented plate. She was too zealous to be concerned with her own conduct. They were married now, even if they were discovered, there could be no real harm in it. She needed to live this life to its fullest, relishing in their vitality.

From that encounter onwards she had replaced her usual physical regimen with sex. Parrying and lunging exchanged for pouncing and ravishing her man. Her urges were out of control and this form of swordplay was perfectly safe for their unborn. The whole arrangement came much to Jaime's delight. Though he often chuckled at his own expense. Brienne could still picture him, lying upon the rough wooden floor, chest rising and falling rapidly. Panting, breathless and spent but grinning like a maniac. “I'm older than you Wench. I spend hours training the men and then you're insatiable. I'm exhausted! How am I to keep up this pace?”

She had run her hand suggestively over his abdomen. “We will have to increase your stamina.” The Lady Knight used her Commander's voice on him, the same one she would use when drilling trainees back at Winterfell. The tone she knew he found enticing. Kissing his hipbone and trailing her tongue across the scar from his stab wound. “The only way to build up endurance is more practice. Fight through the fatigue....”

She smiled at the memory. That was several moons ago now. Like all stages in her pending motherhood that phase too had passed. Her system in a constant state of flux.

Brienne inhaled the scent of sweat and occasional spilled blood, her heightened senses detecting even the faintest of secretions from her position downwind. She paced the perimeter, occasionally stopping to close her eyes. Sounds were amplified in the absence of sight.

- **Grating, clanking** – she studied the notes in the clangour.
- **Rasping, ragged breath.** *That fighter tires, he will yield soon.*
- **Clashing resumes, deflect – clink.** *There.*

“Did you hear it?” She murmured to her heavily pregnant stomach, rubbing it affectionately. “Valyrian steel makes a different noise on impact.” As far as she was concerned it was never too early to begin an education in swordplay. And she had little else to do. Opening her eyes, she began to watch, unsurprised to find Jaime now in the melee. She had predicted correctly. He had taken the place of the soldier who had grown weary. “Your Father has stepped in.” Brienne narrated. “Now they will be tested....I wonder if you shall be like this one day?”
Curiously their little one seemed to appreciate their time in the vicinity of the yard. She could not be certain whether it was the din of clattering metal or a reaction to the excitement within her own system but the result was always the same - energetic forceful kicking.
The first time she had felt the impact she shouted for Jaime.
He had abandoned his duel, dropping Widow's Wail and barreling over to her, concern etched across his mien. Brienne had grabbed his hand and pressed it firmly to the spot.
The smiles they exchanged were effervescent.
“Our babe is like us.” She had whispered to him, filled with love and elated that her husband could share this moment with her.
He was alight with wonderment as he felt their child moving beneath his palm.
Jaime’s constant sense of gratitude throughout every milestone was both shattering and heart melting. She knew how much he needed this after his past. His appreciation of her sacrifices grew alongside her expanding stomach and he seemed to feel the need to thank her each time he was included.
That day it had been in the unabashed way he had stretched up to kiss her.
Undaunted by her size, appearance or the garrison nearby.
He kissed her with such tender worship and open adoration that under his lips she could have been convinced she were the most beautiful and prized woman in the world.
When he returned to his men she heard him proudly announce, “My baby is kicking.”
And as they clapped him on the back her golden lion had shone like the sun.
Jaime caught her eye as he positioned himself to begin a new bout.
She nodded once and grinned as per their agreement. Brienne would give him a signal if the kicking began. It provided his inspiration to finish the match quickly, to win so he could retire for the day and join them.
* Hopefully for lunch – she had never been this ravenous in her life.

* * *

“Why does everything in my life amount to 'large?'” Brienne grumbled.
She lay on her back on top of their light feather down quilt, her head propped up on two pillows.
She was still unable to see her feet.

The balcony doors in their chambers were thrown wide open permitting air to circulate.
The night was still and bright, moonlight twinkling its silver sheen upon the ocean blackened by the velvet sky.
Even the roar of the waves which crashed perpetually upon their shores was lessened this evening, the swells kept low by the still atmosphere.
Spring was in full bloom and so was she.
If only it had the same effects on her as it had on the sea.
But no. The opposite in fact.

Jaime chortled as he tugged on his linen nightshirt. “Surely everything in your life being large cannot be a bad thing?”
The connotation was not lost on her. Rolling her big azure marbles at him she continued. “I reserve my right to complain. I have never been small but at least I was agile. Now I am a lumbering aurochs.”
Since her belly had grown - and continued to do so - she felt cumbersome, often concerned she was carrying too big.
She had seen other noblewomen who cradled petite bumps that were easily concealed by flowing fabrics. She was not so lucky.
Typical, I have never been dainty.
The Lady Knight was used to feeling ungainly but this impeded her movement and leech at her energy.

“‘Yes, but you’re my aurochs.’

*Glad to hear he hasn't lost his complimentary way with words.* She furrowed her brow at him.

“Come on wench – you didn't seriously think you would bear small? Look at us!” He threw himself down on the mattress next to her and pecked her cheek, running a single finger slowly down the curve of her stomach and back up again. “You're fine. You are exactly the way I pictured you to be. Robust, healthy and...round.” Jaime stifled his amusement, trying desperately to swallow it as he jostled her for a place upon her pillow. “Besides, I still find you attractive....”

This time he slid his finger higher coming to rest between her breasts. His voice deep and frisky. “Want me to show you?”

“No.” She huffed at him but his playfulness was doing the trick. She could feel herself warming, a slow smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “As terribly flattered as I am by you agreeing with my aurochs comparison - somehow I don't feel inclined.” This time he laughed openly. Rolling off the pillow and onto his back.

Brienne reached out a long arm to snag his pillow and smack him with it. He wrested it from her grasp, still in the grips of mirth. His gorgeous features never more animated than when he was being mischievous. She could almost see what he must have been like as a little boy. It made her imagine the face of their own child and remember why she was putting herself through this.

“I love you, you know....” Jaime said out of the blue. She didn't realise they had been staring at each other.

“...Even if you are an aurochs – though in all fairness I am happy to downgrade you to milk cow if you prefer. I think it suits the situation better.”

“Don't do me any favours.” He had called her that once before. Years and years ago. When she had disliked him immensely. She couldn't even conjure up a memory of what that felt like now. All she knew was her devotion. Lifting her arms up she compromised. “Come here.”

She guided his head to her breast, leaning her chin on his hair and stroking the side of his cheek. Following the line of his scar as she so often did. Their secret intimate gestures, as unique to them as their fingerprints. An outsider could never comprehend how they communicated, how they would goad and bait each other.

Jaime's peculiar frank honesty suited her perfectly, for it carried no falseness or pretense. If he had said she was petite and comely she never would have believed and instead branded him a lickspittle. Mocking him for his cowardice and insulted that he thought her that gullible and fragile.

These accordant traits were connate, marking them as a couple. A precise constellation of attributes, aligning with such precision that it eclipsed definition to all but them and their divine creators. Those who in their wisdom had crafted them exclusively to complement each other.

“What kept you after lunch this afternoon?”

“I received a lengthy letter from Tyrion. It took me a while to read and absorb it all.” Jaime nuzzled in, happy with his replacement pillows.

“How is my good-brother?”

“Himself. He says to give you his best and suggests Tyrion is a good name to place on the list.”

“That sounds like him.”
Jaime sat up suddenly. “On names – do you know what I figured out?”
She blinked at him. *He is unpredictable tonight.* “I'm guessing you're going to tell me.”
“Yes.” He looked hesitant. “I hope this doesn't upset you....I don't mean to.”
“After our last conversation? You are in fine form this evening. You may as well continue.”
Jaime took a deep breath. “Well, it's not actually about this baby. It's about – babe of Winter.”
“Go on.” She was intrigued even if the mention of it still stirred up feelings of loss.

“If I had died....our baby wouldn't have been trueborn. Actually if I had lived as well, because my recovery and journey took so long, you would have long given birth. Therefore it would have had a bastard name and I'm guessing you would have traveled back here to your Father to raise our child.”
It was all so bleak, it caused an ice chill in her veins. “This is a delightful topic Jaime, please do continue.”
“There is a point!” He held up his hand placatingly. “You call that child babe of Winter, but you don't know that I shorten it in my head to just 'Winter.' It was made in the heart of Winter, at Winterfell and I think it's befitting.”
“So do I - but what is your conclusion?”
“Do you realise what it's name could have been? Or is. Because I have decided it.”
“What?”

“Winter Storm.” He beamed. “How delightfully perfect is that?”
“I can see the poetic nature of it.” She recalled the freezing nights in the distant North, how they had heated each other, fulfilling their long harboured desires and finally acknowledging the depth of their love. All whilst the cruelest Winter in memory raged around them. She could still see the storm of ice that arrived with the Night King, that which drove her and Jaime closer, fusing them together in their determination not to lose each other. How her heart had screamed when she saw the undead surrounding him. Her resolve as she cut her way to his side that of a woman besotted, not a comrade at arms.
*Yes – he is right. Our next chapter all began in a Winter Storm.*

“I love it.” She kissed his nose. “Our first deserves a name, I never want to forget it existed.”
“Now I just have to work on the next one.” He patted her stomach.
“Let's not get carried away.” Naming a Lord or Lady was a completely different responsibility. “We have a while yet to think on it. What else did Tyrion say?” Brienne was keen to change the topic before he had another idea, she settled Jaime back down upon her chest.

“He wanted us to know about the Summit.”
“Yes, I was curious. How did it go?”
“For the better part quite well. Tyrion is good at this, though apparently so is Sansa. He wrote me that; 'It is a shame, we would have made quite the cunning couple. If only it hadn't been for her murderous inclinations towards my family.‘”

Brienne pursed her lips. “Did he give any details?”
“The part with the Iron Islands was easily settled, some oceanic trade routes to figure out but nothing more. Their rule is isolated to the sea, so it was simple enough. But he and Sansa spent days negotiating the terms of their borders. Each trying to outplay the other. Tyrion is confidant that he has the upper hand. He planted several sets of eyes within her walls.
Even – you are going to be appalled by this – bribing a member of her Queensguard. His angle was; 'Sansa believes the Northmen are loyal therefore can't be bought but the Northern Lords are stingy with their purse-strings and Lannister pockets run deep.'
Tyrion has always hailed to the adage that everyone has a price.”
Brienne frowned. “I will remind myself that she made her bed and remark no more about it. Certainly such would never have happened when I was guarding her. But Jaime she spent years at court and learning from Littlefinger – surely she would try the same tactic?”

“She did. Tyrion says he preempted it. He took a retinue of hired guards, cloaked them like Kingsguard and declared them 'his most loyal and trusted men.' The only real true people who attended him were Podrick and Davos. All the others were temporary. They took the coin Sansa bribed them with and were sent away from King's Landing the day they returned. Therefore no-one in the Keep was exposed to temptation.”

“His plans are always clever. Tyrion can play the game - I never could. Being on the council was more wearisome than any battlefield.”

“That's because you are honest Brienne. And I wouldn't have you any other way.”

They fell silent. Originally she thought it was from tiredness but then she observed that her husband was deep in thought. “Jaime?”

She watched his shoulders move as he exhaled, moving from their cuddle to lie next to her. “I want us to be face to face so we can have a chat.”

“This sounds serious.”

“It is – but not ominously so. Tyrion wants me to ask you something and he mentioned it again in today's letter.”

“Again? So it's not the first time the topic has come up?”

“No. We discussed it when he was here.”

She frowned. “You've been keeping something from me since before we were married?”

“Only because I didn't want to upset or stress you before the wedding. We had so much going on.”

Brienne stopped to contemplate this. A nagging voice in the back of her mind told her what she needed to say. “I will overlook you keeping a secret from me on those grounds – but it means you owe me the same in return should I ever have need to use it.”

“I have to agree or it makes me a hypocrite doesn't it?”

“Yes. But this is a singular occurrence Jaime. One each and then never again. I want us to always be truthful with each other. Deal?”

“Fine – I don't want to withhold anything between us either. Full disclosure. I'm happy to ask you now anyway. Seven Hells! Tyrion's idea just went and got me in debt with my own wife.”

“And remember you always pay them.....what has our King devised this time?”

“His Grace would like to potentially name our children as his heirs to the throne.”

The Lady Knight felt her mouth drop open slightly.

The detached eerie voice of Bran Stark replaying in her mind. He had all the bearings of a King.....

“Jaime is he serious? What about the voting system? Won't he Father heirs of his own?”

“Tyrion doesn't wish to wed and he wants to keep his marriage to Sansa in play for political leverage. The voting system is flawed, we have already seen it appoint two monarchs and one was definitely not the best choice. Tyrion says the Lords and Ladies are already losing interest in the concept and it could breed dissent. So yes, Brienne he is quite determined. His only stipulation is that his choice is dependent upon the child's personality. He is more like to pick from suitability rather than birth order.”

“This is monumental.”

“I know. See why I didn't want it playing on your mind before our ceremony?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think?”

“I'm not opposed.”
Her husband looked genuinely taken aback. She knew he had not anticipated that reaction from her - she was not an ambitious person. But prestige held no interest to her, it was not even a factor in her reasoning.

“Jaime – our child will be raised right. With imparted morals, a sense of responsibility and taught not to judge from appearances or wealth. The Knightly codes, they are of great virtue. If these principals are successfully instilled then indeed we can ensure that an honourable monarch who will do good for the realm will sit the Iron Throne.”

He looked hopeful. “Do you think we can do it?”

She pressed her oversized hand to his cheek. “You never wanted to be King. I never wanted anything more than to be a Knight. I didn't even want my title of Lady. Craving power is the first downfall of a regent. You and I - we both deposed King’s who were cruel and inflicted hardship upon others. We know the balance that must be kept. All that you have seen makes you the perfect person to ensure history does not repeat.”

“And you have the moral integrity I lack.”

“How many ruler's have we personally watched fail or contributed to their overthrowing? Between the pair of us?” She mentally chalked up the impressive tally as Jaime began listing them aloud.

“Aerys, Robert....”

“Renly.”

“Joffrey, Tommen.”

“Stannis.”

“Cersei, Daenerys.”

“Bran. It's a long list isn't it?”

“The way you put it wench we are overqualified.”

“Factor in Tyrion's experience and I would say he has once again seen a true opportunity.”

“So you wish me to tell him yes?”

Brienne worried at her bottom lip as she thought about it. “Nothing will be set in stone. I most definitely do not want my child raised knowing the plan. Especially not if Tyrion is waiting for an individual personality to develop. Nor do I want the Kingdom to know it prematurely. You may tell him I agree on these conditions. That way if it does not eventuate there is no greater ramifications and a target is not painted on our child's back. It is our heir – first and foremost. Anything else is subject to discussions and in the hands of the Gods.”

Jaime wrapped his right arm around her back, pulling her as close as he was able with his stump and her stomach hindering him. “You know – you may be better at playing the game than you think.”

* * *

Long after Jaime had fallen asleep, Brienne lay awake. She watched the glimmering of the stars in the zenith of the heavens over her husband's shoulder. Wondering if the Gods did look down upon them. Questioning if the Crone truly did guide their fate.

Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. *Bran was right. His visions showed the future true.*

Their child could be King. The circumstances had altered but the end result was the same.

*The greatest swordsman Westeros has ever seen....* She thought of the way her unborn babe grew restless at the clashing of steel. How it belted her enthusiastically from within, keen to learn and join in the combat.
Her blue eyes welled without sound. Pooling wet and spilling over.
She did not wish to rouse Jaime. She couldn't answer his questions.
Her tongue grew thick and her throat constricted at the thought.
*At least I have the bargain we struck*... 

Nobody knew what she did.
She had told herself it wasn't real.
That Bran was trying to hurt her.
That his visions were not set in stone.

His parting words still haunted.
The phrase he implanted in her brain as he hurled to his doom.
Brienne could deny no longer.
Time stood still for no man or woman. It marched on regardless.
*There is one more prophecy to come*...
Mortality

Chapter Notes

Ok, sorry this was a week in the making but prepare for an influx! LOL
I wanted to publish more than one chapter in quick succession (two chapters are coming tonight and another tomorrow!)

The reason?
Well....did I ever say I was done with drama? ;)
Welcome to my last hurrah of angst....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His wife was out of sorts the next morning.
Jaime sensed it from the instant sunlight disturbed their rest. He had awoken before her, which was a rarity.
The first telltale sign had been the way she slept. Clutching at his shoulder.
He noted the way she twisted the fabric of his nightshirt in her iron grip. The tension in her fingers too severe for someone who was supposed to be drifting through a relaxed meadow of dreams. Though he himself knew that higher plane was riddled with potholes and it was all too easy to misstep, falling into a pit of nightmares.

"Brienne...." He rolled over to face her, disrupting her slumber. She sat up abruptly releasing him. Wriggling free of their covers as hastily as she could, avoiding meeting his gaze. Jaime spied the tracks of dried tears on her cheeks, glimmering in the early beams.
She does not want me to see...

He helped disentangle her from their sheets with his left hand, bracing against her back with his strong right arm.
Round with child she found everything a more strenuous task. “Are you well?”
“Yes Jaime, I just have to piss.” Her coarse speech was the third warning bell.
Although she did cuss readily - he had come to know their contexts.

She would curse at him in play, a habit from the camps.
Proving she could trade obscenities with the big boys. An assertion of her place amongst the men, repelling the general female sensitivities. 'Piss off' was a particular preference.
She was also not opposed to letting a swear word or two slip past her lips when he was between her thighs. Her demands or exclamations uttered without coherent thought, the pursuit of pleasure banishing any attempt at eloquency. His personal favourite.

But this was another more worrying kind. She dropped profanities when she was upset.
When something had rattled her. Designed to act as a distraction from the larger issue at hand.
Meant to shock the other party into a different behaviour.
He remembered the first time she had used the technique on him. “Oh fuck loyalty!”
It had stopped him in his tracks.

Then again at the feast in Winterfell. Tyrion had embarrassed her.
“I have to piss.” The brash statement deflected her mortification onto the perpetrator.
Allowing her to excuse herself while pretending she hadn't been bothered.
When in fact it was the opposite.

Brienne was raised by a Septa. She knew how to turn her foul language on and off. That it had a time and place. Last week in general conversation she used the phrase 'make water.' The contrast was blazing. *If she is trying to scare me off from making further enquiries....it's not going to work.*

He sat in their bed awaiting her return from the privy. When she emerged she busied herself at the wash basin, dipping a cloth in water and wiping her face whilst she stared in the looking glass. To the untrained eye it was her morning routine. *Too late wife, I already saw the stains. I know you have been crying....*

A wave of guilt washed over him. *What if she took my teasing to heart?* He had not meant to hurt her. He wouldn't inflict pain on her for the world. *Surely she knows that...but her condition does make her more touchy that usual.* Jaime reasoned that he could not ask without bringing the topic up again, which would be a mistake. On closer inspection he noticed dark circles under her eyes.

*Perhaps she did just have a nightmare?* Though normally they would wake each other. Rise from bed to sit and share in a cup of spiced milk, talking the horrific visions away until they lost their power. It was a routine they had started in Winterfell, both tormented by reliving the terrors of the undead. But it had its origins in a far more distant time. When they were held hostage in the Riverlands, consolation was found in the nearness of the other. It formed part of his compulsion to return to her at Harrenhal.

He hated the thought that in the present, when their relationship was more intimate than ever before, she had sobbed alone rather than seek his arms. “Did you sleep soundly?” He enquired. “I rarely do these days. It is difficult to get comfortable.” Having finished freshening up, Brienne collected her clothes for the day ahead, draping them over her arm. “Are you training this afternoon?”

Gathering his thoughts, Jaime decided to foster their closeness. Whatever was bothering his wench, he needed to chase it away. *Starting now.* “Actually – no. I plan on giving it a miss. I was hoping we could spend the day together. Wander into town, perhaps organise some things for the baby? I have heard there is a carpenter who fashions furniture out of driftwood. We might be able to commission something if we like his handiwork. What do you think?”

By her strange behaviour this morning he had presumed she would balk. Instead her face had softened, quivering her mouth in a tight lipped smile as she responded. “I would like that very much.” In four strides – prior to her pregnancy she had only required two long ones - she was in front of him, throwing her arms around his neck in a sudden display of affection which caught him off guard. “Truth be told I would like nothing more.” Her belly required her to lean over him as she rubbed her cheek against his own.

“I thought you might be mad at me?” It was a pleasant revelation to be wrong. “Not even slightly. I just have a lot on my mind.” She kissed his temple and then the tip of his nose. “I miss you when you're off doing the rounds. I know duty must prevail but – it is lonely waiting around. I'm not built for it.”
Jaime just chuckled. “Now you know how I felt at Winterfell.”
“Can we spend more time together? Just for the duration of my confinement? Or do I ask too much?” There was an emotion tainting her voice which he could not place. For some reason it made him wish to shiver.

“I very much like what you propose My Lady and we shall commence just as soon as I have gone downstairs to cancel my training session. But I can do that whilst you finish dressing. You are slower than me nowadays and considering my one handed speed that is saying something.” She nodded suppressing a giggle. “You will regret wanting to walk into town with me.”
“I guess I’ll learn.”

Jaime pulled on his clothes as he tried to rationalise the events of the morning. His intuition screamed at him that something was amiss but he decided the only cure was to proceed as planned. He would also move forward a present for her which he had been saving. He intended to give it to her when their baby was born but figured it may lift her spirits now. *A day of luxuriating in the sun, planning for our child and showering her with gifts and love. What can’t that fix?*

* * *

The faint hint of salt could still be detected though the ocean was far out of sight, the earthy aromas of flora and foliage becoming more prominent. The winding gravel pathway wove its way through pastures, over slight mounds and dips in the ground as it travelled inland. Evenfall Hall grew smaller in the background as they made their slow meander towards town. Although Jaime had never visited it before, he had been told it lay in a gully between two hillsides and would remain invisible until they were upon it.

Their stronghold had been built on high ground, the crest suitable for tactical advantage. The journey down was a very slight slope, the ground gradually declining over such a distance that you barely noticed it falling away. He was glad as it would make for an easier trek for his pregnant wife, though she knew the route they travelled like the back of her hand.

They were quiet as they strolled but it was not unpleasant. It was seldom Jaime could be at ease without incessant chatter but the atmosphere would seem sullied by the sound of human voices. He kicked the odd loose stone out of the way, lest it trip Brienne and she smiled at him in thanks. The low buzz of insect wings and the whispers of grasses the music of their surrounds. Dandelions bounced, nodding their heads in greeting as they passed.

Jaime never imagined a locale so sublime. The utopian quality of the island so far removed from everything he had ever known, it seemed more representative of heaven than of Westeros. Ofttimes as he stared at his Wench in delirious happiness he decided that indeed he must have died beneath the crumbling ruins of the Red Keep. That everything which followed was a journey to the afterlife, where he had been transported to a paradise of which Melj was the Gatekeeper.... But no. The Kingslayer was never bound for the Blessed Lands of the Righteous. A firey trench of atonement and torment surely awaited him in the depths of Seven Hells. Though that didn't explain how he deserved to end up here, in this euphoria.

He had mentioned it once to Brienne, when wake and sleep confused him. Reversing his new life for one of anguish. Where this became the dream and the alternative the reality. Now his worst nightmares were that he awakened – the Father and Stranger glowering down at him.
’That was the life you could have lead...’ They intoned, revealing it all to be a vision as they condemned him alone to an endless abyss.

“I have told you Jaime, countless times. You are a good man. Your contentment is well earned.” Her hand on his face and the brush of her lips had both confirmed and further befuddled. She was so tender with him it could only be dreamlike, but the sensation was so real. “How can it be true? I have done such terrible things...” “I believe,” his wife had been serious. Her blue eyes wide in the dark as she implored him to accept her assessment of his character. “That your life before was your penance. For each wrong you committed, you paid a dear price. But your every good deed went unacknowledged. They amassed to this existence. Your punishments are done. Now bask in your rewards.”

Subconscious trauma was a heinous thing. Tricking you into believing that all you held most precious balanced precariously upon a dagger's deadly edge. Surely that is what plagued her this morning. Brienne was selfless enough not to mention it. Knowing he would press her for details. Odds were she did not want to trigger his own demons of the past, setting him back and undoing all her hard work and reassurances. Instead she would internalise and endure on her own if it would shield him from further suffering. That is the kind of woman I married. His heart swelled. And bask I will....

The delicious warmth of the Spring rays penetrated the fabric of his clothes. The gentle puffs of air which rustled nearby branches carried with them the occasional waft of perfume from some unseen bloom. A ladybird carried upon its currents alighted briefly on his arm. He smiled as it scuttled, stretching out his finger to extend its journey. Watching it ruffle its tiny wings before taking to the air again. It’s flight was short lived as it found a new resting place upon his wife’s breast. Brienne followed his gaze to see what had him so fascinated – most likely spurred to curiosity because his line of sight was trained upon her bosom. Jaime crossed to her, realisation dawning upon her face as he picked up the diminutive insect with the greatest of care. Enchanted by his benign treatment, she kissed his cheek, softly lipping at his beard and making him feel for one moment like the chivalrous hero of her girlish fantasies for saving this little creature. He set it free upon a nearby shrub, a trifling task for a Lord such as he, yet somehow it filled him with pride.

As Lannister heir apparent he had been raised in a far colder habitat than his woman. This was incontestably plain. From an early age he had been taught that everything beneath the Lion's mighty paws was insignificant. Theirs to crush. Like the distant relative he and Tyrion had once recollected. Growing up here – amidst nature and simplistic treasures – it was no wonder Brienne was so down to earth. Her unassuming oneness with life itself a marvel. It was a grievous shame she had been exposed to the mainland, where the hardened souls chewed up virtuous dispositions and spat out insults. Once he had called Tarth a ‘ghastly large rock in the narrow sea’ but he had been wrong. It was a pebble's smooth soft curves in comparison to Casterly Rock's jagged edges and gnarled cliffs. He certainly knew which he'd prefer to rear a babe. I wonder what we'll have?

Jaime paused where he stood to appreciate his wife. All slow gait and ample fullness which she was trying to accept with grace, even if he heard her
frustrated growls every now and again. The resplendent glow of the noon encapsulated her like a divine aura. It's brightness making spots dance in front of his eyes. But that's what it was always like for him. Gazing upon Brienne was like staring into the sun. Oft it was said that the Lannister's were golden – the term attributed to them for their tremendous wealth and pleasing looks. However his Lady Knight took the term to a more meaningful level. The personification of radiant goodness who accepted him for all his faults. If he looked too long he could be blinded by the emotions which her image stirred within him. No trial had been too arduous, no sacrifice too great, no pain too agonising if it meant she was his in the end.

The verdant hillsides looked so inviting. The lush green grasses of the meadow beckoning like a feather down mattress. The field scented with bliss and sounding only of tranquility. One day - when she felt herself again and their baby's cries drove them to the loving brink of parental insanity - he would bring her out here. Lay her amongst the fresh sweet blades. Let the serenity of completeness become their bower as he hopefully planted their next within her womb. The essence of the picturesque idyl, a canvas for the art of their lovemaking. The epitomic backdrop for a seed taking route. She would protest of course. He could hear her already, bringing a silly grin to his face. 'Jaime the path is often used. Jaime what if we're seen?' He chuckled at the notion of a hapless passerby stumbling across them, completely unawares it was their Lord and Lady. Mistaking them for young lovers who seized upon the chance of splendour in the grass...

“Jaime!” Brienne called to him, snapping him out of his reverie. She was a good distance ahead of him. “Here I was thinking I would be the slow one, yet you are keeping me waiting. Hurry up! Shopping at the market can wait – I'm growing hungrier by the minute. Food will be out first destination, your child needs to eat!” She folded her arms in mock impatience. “Coming wench!” He gave one last lingering look to the spot he'd selected, before jogging to catch up with her. That is a dream for Summer....

* * *

“This is truly quite remarkable, I have to say I'm impressed.” Jaime folded his arms across his chest and gave his wife an appraising glance. Their conversation was easy and their banter was like breathing. The great hall was empty bar for them and the occasional staffer who peered into the room. The night sky beyond the windows was an endless black, smelling faintly of rain. Frequently clouds rolled in from the ocean bringing with them short lived showers. Both sat astride a bench at the long table, choosing to eat in a less formal manner, more suitable to the warriors they were at heart. “I know.” Brienne cringed behind her hand, pushing the bread roll reluctantly away. All he could see of her face was a toothy grin. “It's ridiculous, I have nothing to say to defend myself. I am a bottomless pit.” She had stolen from his plate after she was done with her. “May we clear up M'Lord, M'Lady?” A serving maid timidly enquired. They knew it was late and the attendents were probably keen to get to bed. “Yes.” Brienne waved enthusiastically at the table. “Please take it away. Far, far away from me.” Jaime laughed, snatching kisses the moment they were alone again. “Well someone has a good appetite.” He placed his hand on her stomach, hoping to feel any movements beneath the surface. “Like all little lion cubs should.” “You may be waiting a while Jaime....I think someone is full and sleeping.” She took his hand between her own, raising it up to press it against her mouth, sighing deeply. “I very much enjoyed
today. Thank you.”

“You don't have to thank me. So did I. And you should be happy we were productive, that cradle will be a masterpiece when its done. I just hope it arrives before the baby does.” Brienne stared over his shoulder, somewhere far away. Her blue eyes vacant and unseeing as she absent-mindedly stroked the back of his hand. He had not seen that look since this morning.

“Brienne?”
She blinked and smiled at him, it seemed forced. “Yes, it will be splendid.”

“What's wrong?” He whispered, bending his forehead to hers so they were touching.
“I just thanked you for a wonderful day....”
“You don't fool me. I know you too well.” She had closed her eyes and he watched her swallow.
“Talk to me...” Jaime urged.
But instead she kissed him. Closing the gap between them, knotting her hand into his hair to hold him in place. Their was an urgency behind it. Earnest and needy. It knocked the air from his lungs.
When she finally pulled away all enquiring words had died on his tongue.
It's not us – he mused. We are fine. Distraction seems to work in bringing her out of herself....
“Come with me.” He rose from the seat and held out his hand to her.
She took it, allowing him to lead her to their chambers.
A box sat in the middle of their bed.
Brienne cocked her head to the side. “Where did that come from?”
He slipped his arms around her from behind, now instead of her waist he had to aim higher, looping them just below her bust. “From your Lord Husband.”
“Jaime – why? I don't need gifts....”
“Who said it's for you?” His eyes sparked. “You just get to open it.” He pecked her neck and pushed her forward. “Go on...”

Steadily lowering herself down to sit upon the bed, she pulled the box over. It was wooden and latched, their new sigil carved in the corners. “A lot of work has gone into this.”
“Indeed.” He sat beside her. “Everything was crafted especially, at my behest.”
“You know I...we...” She corrected herself before he exploited the loophole in her comment again. “....Don't need to be given things to know we are loved. We can feel it.”
“What about just to brighten your day?”
“I spent it with you - like I wanted. I need nothing more.” Jaime pouted. “Let me spoil you both....please? Besides, I think you're going to like this one.”

Temptation won out as she reverently ran her fingers along its sanded edges, meeting in the centre to lift the catch. Jaime watched her face, wanting to witness her reaction the moment she unveiled its contents. Raising the lid, her lips parted, a rush of air escaping between. “Jaime....”

He knew what was inside.
The box had been lined in blue silk, the indentation perfectly shaped within. The blade was small, an exact replica of a greatsword in a childlike size. It's pommel was wrought in gold, in the similar style to Oathkeeper and Widow's Wail. Adorned with sapphires and rubies, the lion's head balanced to either side by the crescent moon and starburst.
“Do you like it?” He asked. “I wish it could be Valyrian steel, but it's the next best thing. Lord
Gendry smithed it personally for us. If any child is going to be armed, it will be ours. I suspect our little one will graduate from Tourney swords rather quickly, especially under your tutelage.”

Brienne leant her elbow upon her knee, pressing her hand to her mouth. Her other clenched into a fist as she struggled against an unnamed emotion. Her breathing came in fits and starts and her cerulean pools glassed over. Her nodded response was comprised of swift jerky motions. When she finally flexed out her fingers, releasing her whitened knuckles, her hands shook with a violent tremor.

What has caused this? Is it happiness?

He caught one of her hands in his own and felt it tremble within his grasp. She is overcome.... Jaime supposed it had been a lot to take in.

Last night they had spoken of their child being in line to rule the Six Kingdoms. Perhaps it had scared her, sovereigns did not have the best track record for longevity in Westeros. It could make her fearful for their offspring. But then - being a skilled warrior would safeguard their claim. Giving the future King or Queen the ability to provide their own protection. I must calm her....

He knew she loved stories, the genesis of the ideals she had been raised upon.

“My love...” Jaime pushed the box further into the centre of the bed, so he could move closer to her. “...our child, boy or girl, could be the next great Knight of Legends. Think - one day they may tell tales of us. The Kingslayer wed the First Ladyknight....” He thought of Hugor of the Hill and the reading at their wedding. “...and their child wielded the blade of the Just.”

“The greatest....” Her voice was strangled. “....swordsmen Westeros has even seen.”

At the end it broke.

She launched herself into his arms, burying her face into his shoulder. Her chest heaved as she was wracked with violent sobs. “He told me....” She shuddered against him. “He told me....”

Jaime enveloped her in his arms, rattled by her sudden outpouring. He caressed his wife's hair as he made soothing noises.

“Brienne, who told you?” Kissing her temple, her forehead he tried to mollify her. “Told you what?”

“They're coming true.....I didn't want all the visions to be right....”

“Visions?”

Her voice was scarce a whisper. “Bran.”

“That cunt.” Jaime snarled. The name was a blight upon their household. He almost wished the former King were still alive so he could delight in slowly tearing him limb from limb. He would relish making the sinister boy suffer for bringing tears to his wife's eyes and causing her distress. “He is gone Brienne. Long gone. Your nightmares can't hurt you...”

“It wasn't a dream. It was the day he died.” He could hear her sniffing, summoning her fortitude, the steel returning to her tone. Composing herself enough to speak. She had mentioned the visions once before, when she explained her actions on that fateful day. Though she hadn't delved into detail.

Jaime rubbed her back slowly. He could feel the warm swell of her stomach pressed between them. My family is safe. He told himself.

They were encircled in his arms and he could shield them from anything. “He is powerless now. You are here, you are my wife. Our child is here and thriving within you. Everything is alright.”

Lifting her head from his shoulder, she shook it sadly. Running her quivering hand up and down his chest.
“He predicted everything Jaime. That our child has the makings of a King. That he would be unbeatable with a blade. Then there was one more....” Several tears ran down her cheeks. “I love you so much. I couldn't bear to tell you. I told myself he was wrong and just trying to hurt us. Please don't be angry with me, remember our agreement from last evening.” Her pleas were gut wrenching. “I don't want to spend one minute at odds with you.”

Squeezing her shoulder tightly her stared directly into her eyes. “Tell me now Brienne. Is it our child? Did he foresee doom in its future? We have time, we can fix it....”
“No. That was all he said about our babe.” A fresh stream of tears coursed in raging rivers, more turbulent that the Trident after flooding rain. “I don't want to leave you....”
Ice gripped his chest. A vice suffocating air from his lungs. His voice strangled as he choked out. “What do you mean?”

“He impressed a phrase into my mind whilst he was falling. I think he was trying to take me over – but he didn't have time and I fought back. It all happened so fast. I received his message though. His parting words.” She swallowed again, through with trying to suppress. Her chin and bottom lip quaked, droplets splashed from her chin and soaked the collar of her tunic.

Jaime had not seen her this devastated since the night he left her at Winterfell.

* I never wanted to see her in that level of pain again.

But it was his turn to be ruined.
Ravaged and disintegrated into naught but anguish by the next sentence she uttered.

“With my fate, you seal your own. You will die in your birthing bed.”

Chapter End Notes

Side notes: Has anyone ever heard the superstition – the direction in which a Ladybug flies is where you'll find your true love? :)

Then – when you have to check you quoted lines correctly and rewatch the banquet scene at Winterfell. It has to be said: Jaime Lannister has NEVER been happier than when he looks at Brienne in this scene. My heart just melted for the one millionth time thanks to them. <3
Harrowing

Chapter Summary

Jaime processes the frightening revelation....

Chapter Notes

This is the truth – I had a dream last night. In it some clever hacker leaked an alternative ending for Game of Thrones that was never meant to escape HBO. It was short and poorly cut but showed Jaime and Brienne married in the end, whilst Cersei fled for her life on board a boat with Euron to Essos. The former Queen was enraged by losing both her crown and her brother. Her punishment was having to live with the knowledge. Whilst Jaime and Brienne were just happy with each other....
The Fandom rejoiced with its release. All the pain we felt evaporating into thin air as we all proclaimed that we 'knew it all along.'
I woke up on cloud nine – wondering if it really exists somewhere and wishing they would include alternate endings on the DVDs.
But I suppose this means my brain is finally overwriting the heartache and my fic is working its magic on the toughest of mind's to convince – my own.
Just wanted to share. :)

Jaime stood overlooking the ocean.
The roar of waves and rocks warring against each other, the neverending battering, weathering and beating down into submission still not quite enough to drown out his thoughts.
His eyes were red and bloodshot, circled by shadows belonging to a man who had not one wink of sleep but had cried enough to fill the straits twice over.
The foam swirled below in eddies of riptide, sucking down, swallowing life into a watery grave.
It seemed a pleasant option. Far preferable than the fate which awaited him.
Perhaps that is what I will do....but after.

He was all too aware of Brienne's watchful stare from the balcony high above. Monitoring his every move.
As morning had come he needed to escape. Though little personal space could be found on an island.
“Promise me you will not do something stupid.”
Even if he wanted to he wouldn't. The desire to return to her side yanked upon him like an iron chain. Or a rope. Like the one she had once bound them together with.
Her presence above tugging on it as she had in the Riverlands.
What will happen when that bond is severed?

Jaime had raged the whole night through. Spiralling out of control.
Reasoning, ranting, raving, bargaining with the Gods and himself and any forces that were listening.
“Things change visions are wrong.”
"He can't possibly know, he didn't see his own death coming!"
"He was speaking of Winter, this is babe of Spring."
"You are tough Brienne, you are healthy, you have survived so much."
"The God's can't do this to us...Please don't do this to us. I will do anything."
He had smashed things, torn curtains from railings, bellowed and shook. The whole while, his wife sat by, passively observing his rampage. The pinnacle of forebearance, she only allowed the occasional tear to slip down her face.

His breakdown finally came when he acknowledged that it made sense. He crumbled to the floor and she was with him in an instant. Covering him with her polarisingly strong and gentle body that he knew so well. He would die a thousand deaths if he didn't have her next to him. If he could never again feel her strong arms or heated breath. Hear the timbre of her voice.

"My mother died giving birth to Tyrion." Jaime choked out between sobs. "There is a history."
"So did mine." Brienne revealed. "She passed in labour with my sisters."
"I was never worthy of you. Of this life. They would let me taste it just to take it away. They knew it would destroy me." The rawness of the ache was brutal. "Why must you take my fall? It is not right. It should be me that suffers....but they know. Those malevolent Gods know - nothing in existence could destroy me more than losing you."

No matter how closely he pressed her to him he couldn't prevent this. The comforting kisses she deposited on his lips were bittersweet. "Just love Jaime." She nuzzled him, crooning, collecting his teardrops with her mouth. "Like today....we will make every day just like today and when my time comes there will be nothing I regret. Nothing more I could have wished I did."
"Wish? Brienne... I want my wife by my side. The mother of my child. I want to raise our babe together. I need you in my life. To chase away the misery. Frustrating me with your stubbornness by day and warming my bed at night. Watching our child grow. I will not do this without you! I will not live without you!"

"We don't have a choice." She gritted her teeth and shook him. "You will not abandon our child Jaime. Do you hear me? You will not blame it as your Father did Tyrion. You will not take your life and leave it alone in this world. Not for the self-indulgence of pining for me. I was raised by my Father, here on Tarth. History repeats. You will do the same. I demand it. I insist."
"You don't know what you ask of me."
"Don't I?" She threw her head back in frustration. "Months Jaime. Months I spent in King's Landing. I thought I would never hear your voice again, never feel your touch. It tore me asunder but I lived. I did it. I kept your memory alive because that is what you asked of me. Remember? Is your memory so fleeting? Are your double standards this great?! I wouldn't let you die on me when you lost your hand." She grabbed his stumped right arm for emphasis. "I most certainly will not let you slip away on our child. You have so much to live for."

"I still don't think you realise how much I love you."
At his simple statement she had collapsed against him. All the emotional armour she clad herself in rusting away to nothingness. "What do you want me to say Jaime?" For the first time in her life she was noticeably fragile. "My heart is breaking. I am a warrior, I am not afraid of death but I don't want to die this way. I don't want to leave you in a world where nobody adores you or cares for you the way I do." He closed his eyes, letting her tones fill him, willing his memory to keep her voice locked away in his mind forever. "I want to see our child grow, rearing it alongside you. I wanted to have more, make you proud. Give you everything you ever wanted and never had." Her hands were either side of his face as she slowly kissed his eyelids. "You're everything to me – but I will not forgive you if you forsake the part of us which is united. If it comes to a choice, choose our
child. When I die - if our little one survives you must be there for it. Be the Father you always longed to be.”

The day was fine and sunny.Filled with that crisp renewed aroma released after a Spring rain. Where everything flourishes forth rejuvenated and vibrant.

How dare it be so bright. The world has no right to be this way. Does it not know what we face...

Hearing Brienne speak of her death had just about stopped his heart.
He had ceased arguing as the orange rays crept over the horizon and sought the solitude he now dwelt in. I have to get used to it.....
His body was stone. A heavy unmoving statue. He had been like this for hours.
What can we do?

Jaime willed his veins to pump again, to reanimate the cold hunk of his physical shell. Walking is a start. Placing one foot in front of the other he turned around. Meeting her distant gaze to communicate that he was soldiering on. Notions of ending it all pushed to the temporary wayside.

As he ambled absentmindedly through the castle grounds he reprimanded himself.
I am a selfish man. To place all his angst upon her already burdened shoulders.
It had been a shock, a violent temperamental eruption. Jaime was a man of impulse and passion. He was ill-equipped to handle a prediction of this magnitude without imploding in on himself. But she did not deserve to feel the brunt of it.

My poor beautiful woman....she has enough to deal with besides me. Now she fears I will neglect our child.

In truth he did not know if he could overcome it.
Look upon their bundle of joy and feel connected, if he had just witnessed it tear his wife from his life.
He already felt he couldn't. Knew all he would want and scream for would be Brienne.
Perhaps when grief ebbs I will cling to it. See her within and love our child for it. This just might be the lesson I have to learn....

The castle went about its daily life. Odd glances were cast upon their Lord as they noticed his state of disarray. He did not welcome questions and was glad that the lessers would not communicate directly with him. Jaime was disorientated, he had been moving without particular direction. Fatigue draining on his troubled soul.
He sat defeatedly on a nearby bench. Eyes shut tight, willing his pounding pulse to steady. His head had begun to throb, he was falling apart at the seams.
How long he spent in that position, he could not say. Minutes or hours, he just didn't feel the passage of time.
Going away inside had always been his coping mechanism but now his interior was more unsettled than the outside world.

“Jaime.” The voice garbled in his fuzzied state. He snapped himself back to alert. “How are you my friend?”

Melj had never had qualms about social rank and didn't hesitate to approach him.
The older man was the only wedding guest who had remained for an extended stay, having himself only arrived the day before the ceremony. He had been keen to return to the Infirn but Brienne had suggested that he could work with Maester Bextor for awhile. Refreshing skills and conferring notes. They would request a shipment of medicines and supplies from the Citadel, feigning that the influx of visitors to the island had diminished what meagre stores they had on hand. Then Melj could take them back with him.
He had thanked them profusely and graciously accepted. Primarily the kindly gent kept to himself but Jaime had spotted him assisting the smallfolk and helping in other areas which their Maester deemed too far below himself to interfere. Henceforth Melj had very much endeared himself to the household, though he constantly reminded them all that his place in Tarth was only temporary.

“You knew I was here.” Jaime replied despondently, not believing for one moment that their crossing paths was happenstance. “How?”
Melj smoothed his roughspun beneath him and sat next to his former patient. “People care. They get concerned. Young people especially, when you do not hear them call....”
Jaime nodded understanding. One of the children must have greeted him but it escaped his notice. “I answered your question.” The elderly man was warm but stern. “Yet you did not extend to me the same courtesy. How are you feeling?”

A thousand brush offs thundered through his mind like a stampede but Jaime could not muster the strength to lie. “Like my heart has been pulverised, my body impaled by countless spears and I have been left to bleed out slowly without any foreseeable way of suturing what small shreds of me remain. For you cannot replace the blood in my veins once it has seeped out and a man cannot survive without that which beats in his chest.”
Melj looked thoughtful as he weighed Jaime's words. “You mention your heart – may I surmise this is about your Lady?”
“Is there anything else I truly care about in this wretched scourge of a life?” His tone bit more than he intended but his friend took it in his stride. “A problem shared is not necessarily solved. But it can sometimes lessen the suffering with catharsis.” He shrugged slightly. “You already know that though so I will not pry. Just know that I am here if you feel so inclined.” The older man purposefully took his time rising, Jaime knew he was more spry than the display would insinuate. Infuriatingly determined old man.

“Melj do you believe in prophecy?”
The gent raised his eyebrows before lowering himself back down with surprising ease. “That is quite the question.”
“My sister believed in it and an old nemesis of mine had visions of the future.” Jaime tried to illustrate his own scattered preconceptions on the topic. “When I was younger I used to dismiss the idea of foresight. Writing it off as nonsensical ramblings and that I could live by my sword and shape my own destiny. But too often have things beyond my explanation come to pass. Now I don't know what to trust....” His eyes welled anew. “All I know is fear.”
“You know I think that everything happens for a reason. As part of a greater divine purpose. Whether that counts as prophecy is subject to interpretation, though I would describe them as fundamentally different.”

“What if you were told that a Greenseer - who successfully predicted many events that did indeed unfold the way he described -" A lone tear spilt over. “Foretold the death of your wife in her birthing bed?”
Melj worked his jaw thoughtfully, Jaime could tell that the concept upset him. It only endeared the older man to him.
He could instantly see past her appearance to the woman within...

After a lengthy pause he asked. “Have you spoken to Maester Bextor regarding your concerns?”
“No.” Jaime shook his head vehemently. “I thought on it this morning. I see no point. Maester's are all the same when it comes to this matter. 'Let nature take it's course. A woman's battle is won in childbirth.' If he said such to me I would be like to hit him. Who do you think was here when Brienne's mother died in the same manner? Whose watch do you think it was under? They are fucking useless. They pride themselves on their study, yet they fail. Repeatedly they fail.”
He swiped angrily at his eyes with the back of his hand. “My mother died at the Rock with a
Maester in attendance. All the gold in the world couldn't save her. Her screams echoed the halls for hours. They tried to hide it from us but I could hear them. She died exhausted and in agony. I can't stand by and watch my wife die, her face contorted in pain. My Brienne is brave, she is heroic, she is everything to me. My paragon of light and everything good in this world. I won't listen to her cries and know I'm powerless. To know I'm the cause. I just can't...."

“Permit me....” The elderly gent gripped the Lord's arm comfortingly. “...As a man of both science and faith I have this to say. We cannot know for certain where the paths we take shall lead. That is with good cause. It prevents despair such as this.” He took a deep breath. “But....if everything happens for a reason, then so to did the disclosure of this fate. See it not as the God's mocking you Jaime, but giving you an opportunity. A gift only afforded to some. You and your Lady were told this prophecy - and if it was issued with malicious intent....”

There Melj goes again - I never revealed that part.

“...then the blackheart deserves to be thwarted. His desire to inflict pain with his knowledge actually has given you the power to circumvent its outcome. If the Seven have shown you nothing through your journey my friend, it is that they favour love over hate. Find faith in that and we here as mortals will do all in our power to ensure that we triumph in the end as their instruments.”

The tears dried on his cheeks, Melj had his full attention. “What can we possibly do?”

“Do you remember Darna who helped me attend you?”

Jaime nodded. He recalled most of the people at the Infirmary.

“Her area of skill is midwifery and I have seen her perform great feats in order to spare both Mother and babe. She learned some techniques, in Yi Ti many years ago. She hoped to share them here in Westeros but her ideas were not well received by the Maesters, both by being considered unorthodox and the fact that she is woman.” He paused before adding. “She will help if we ask it.”
Chapter Notes

Well, I broke my own record. This is officially the longest chapter I have ever written. It is three times as long as one of my standard chapters – no wonder it took me half a week to write! It also covers a lot of topics which I had to research in order to be realistic. Here I go again! LOL :)

Jaime paced an endless circuit across the carpeted floors, wearing the fibres, scuffing its surface with his boots. “You do realise you are driving me insane?” Brienne sat upon the chaise lounge, her back nestled against the armrest, her legs propped up on a pillow. She draped one long arm affectionately around her stomach whilst the other balanced a teacup upon its swell.

He drank in her vision, like a mirage which would soon disappear. Jaime didn't want to think this way - constantly pleading with his subconscious to record each minute detail, every flicker of emotion on her face and subtle nuance of expression. If he gave in to this morbid process, it was as if he was admitting defeat – yet he continued. A week ago he would have been perfectly happy, ignorant and eager for their babe's arrival. Now he was on edge. “I'm sorry.” He apologised, acquiescing all too easily. “I can't stay still.”

“Don't you think I'm agitated?” She gestured with her arm in aggravation, almost toppling her tea. With reflexes quicker than a bolt of lightning both warriors sprang to action. Jaime dove for the cup, as her hand shot out, catching it by either side before it spilt. Finding themselves suddenly nose to nose, he soaked in another priceless moment. Brienne just shrugged. “I never was very ladylike.”

Together they had teetered between resignation, denial and resolve. The emotional upheaval of the last sennight beginning to take its toll. He had sent a ship to fetch Darna almost the second Melj had stopped speaking. Seizing upon anyone and anything that could help intervene between the love of his life and the bleak eventuality which loomed before them.

In the interim they had been inseparable. Jaime driven by a compulsion to never let his wife out of his line of sight. As though the Gods themselves were watching and if he were so irresponsible as to turn his back for a mere second, they may snatch her away from him in punishment. After three days, they had received a raven from the Swiftwind. It was mercifully preparing to depart the Portown upon its return journey. Darna had enclosed strict instructions to keep Brienne as immobile as possible. No excessive walking, no exertion, no adrenaline, no sex. Nothing that could encourage labour to begin before she arrived. She would examine Brienne as soon as she made landfall. That was today.

Melj was to greet her at the docks, having been given permission to relay all the knowledge of the situation they possessed. Even if it was piteous little – only harbingers of death and familial
Jaime was to wait with Brienne up in Evenfall Hall. He had taken personal charge of the task of keeping her inactive. *Easier said than done.*

Although neither wanted to admit it, they were beginning to grate on each other's nerves. The constant close proximity and languid inertia feeling entirely unnatural for them. Whenever they opened their mouths to bicker, both stopped short, quickly clamping them shut again. Neither wished to spark an argument that could turn out of hand and ruin what short time they may have left. Though they both itched to quibble - it was afterall the cornerstone of their relationship and communication. Deprived of sparring both verbally and somatically, they had no outlet through which they could vent their frustrations. Jaime had never been the man to play the part of the optimist, yet now he found himself cajoling and enabling. Doling out reassurances whilst silently imploring he was not pinning his hopes upon a false beacon.

He raked a hand through his hair, his breath whistling through clenched teeth. *Why must everything in our lives be fraught with hardship?* Their little vessel was constantly tossed upon roiling waves. Right when the sky cleared a new tempest formed on the horizon. When the weather calmed and clear expanses beckoned, monsters emerged unseen from the deep to drag them under. The beasts lurking below, simply lying in wait to strike at their happiness.

Brienne observed him with sullen fascination, setting her jaw in that rigid determined way. “I'm getting up, I can't take this anymore!” Swinging her legs around, she wriggled awkwardly to the edge of the lounge. “No! You have to stay there. You read what the message said!” He stood in front of her, blocking her off with his body. “You are taking this to the extreme.” She huffed, captivity had more than inflamed her irritability. “I need to walk! My back is aching from being in the one position too long.” Jaime was flooded with panic. “If your back in hurting that is all the more reason for you to remain still!” “Of course it is paining me! All my joints are stiff! You are treating me like an invalid.” She pushed to her feet, regardless of his protests. Her stomach bumping against him when he refused to budge. “Sit back down.” The lion growled at his mate. “I am fine.” She answered with a hiss.

He could easily forget how intimidatingly tall she was. Glaring down at him with her orbs of blue fire. Just daring him to challenge her. “Pig headed, stubborn wench!” Despite their stress she chuckled, his own stern countenance quickly morphing into a smile. “Do you feel better?” She enquired. “You have no idea.” “Oh likewise – believe me.” He knew that facial expression, the triumphant way she implied that he was vexing on her tolerance. *How I love that look*...

“You know-” Their tension broken, her conversation resumed its usual tempo. “I'm more like to die of boredom than of anything else.” “I'm restless too. I have been going out in sympathy for you.” He tried to appease her, knowing it was of little consequence. He had no idea what she was going through.
“But you're pacing! Do you know what I would give to walk? To duel, to....”
The blush in her cheeks told him what the latter wish was.
He winked at her, conveying that he knew.

“Yes Jaime. I would very much like to do that. Once more before....”
“Don’t say it!” He pressed his fingers to her mouth to stop her mid sentence. “No last wishes. No
last words. We are going to have years ahead of us. We just have to keep you still a little longer.”
She was already so maternal, instinctively caring and soothing. Brienne saw through his words as
the transparent attempt at reassurance that they were. Whenever he comforted her, she knew in
truth he was trying to convince himself. Brushing a lock of hair off his forehead, she thumbed the
scar line of his cheek. No longer arguing, simply quiet and attentive.
\textit{She is fixing me in her memory, the same way I do with her}....

Jaime felt a familiar lump rise in his throat which he tried to swallow down.
Observing the way her eyes catalogued every inch of his face as they shone with the watery
essence of unshed tears.
He moved in to kiss her, locking them together in a drawn out sensual demonstration of how he
adored her, searing it upon her lips so they both could be in no doubt.

She pulled away hesitantly. “We are not allowed to get my blood up.”
Jaime nodded. “Trust you to point out when I’m being remiss.”
He smiled at her diligence, though the crinkle of his eyes was easily matched by the crease of
worry on his brow.
He tried desperately to ignore the hollow frightened voice of his own psyche. Snaking its way
through chinks in his fortified soul, like tendrils of smoke from a candle. Minacious whispers from
the Book of the Stranger, infiltrating with their grey dread.
\textit{What will you do when she is gone?}

* * *

She watched as Jaime hovered anxiously at the open doorway, his form buzzing with nervous
energy even when he remained still. He reminded her of the hummingbirds she sometimes spotted
in the garden. Their wings a furious blur of movement, when they appeared motionless.
Brienne could hear the drone of several voices purposefully being kept low.
If one more person treated her as though she were made of porcelain she was going to explode.

\textit{They mean well.} She reminded herself for the umpteenth time.
She had faced legions of the undead, single combat with the Hound and stared down a bear
unarmed, yet when it came to this topic she was being molly-coddled more than a small child in a
thunderstorm.

On the warfield when soliders fell she had heard the same tones.
‘You will be fine. It’s not that bad. You are going to make it.’
Mercy they called it. A kind lie.
It was tragically ironic. Her whole young life she had longed to be treated with the kindness and
respect due to a woman. Wishing someone would realise that although she was unattractive she still
possessed feelings which were easily trampled upon. Instead she had only received disdain and
ridicule. Now older, battle wisened and tough – needing the people she trusted to be straight and
forthright with her, they tiptoed around each phrase as though she would shatter.

\textit{You cry a handful of times as a female and you become frangible.}
If she were honest with herself she did feel flimsy. Her palisades thinner than parchment when she
saw the pain in Jaime’s eyes. But it only gave her more reason to be brave, her stoicism would be
for him. Providing he desisted in sheltering her from conversations. “Jaime Lannister I had hoped better from you.” The Lady Knight's tone was fierce. He turned around as she addressed him, his eyes large and confused. “I rely on you to be frank with me and you have always been true to it - the entire time we've known each other.” Huffing she added. “Don't change it now.”

Jaime favoured her with a slight nod and tight lipped grin, a gesture distinctly unique to him. She had seen it so many times aimed in her direction. It spoke in volumes words which he would not say aloud – primarily, admitting she was right. Stepping promptly aside he revealed a middle aged woman. She wore a serious expression and her dark hair streaked with grey was pulled into a low bun. “Darna this is my wife, Ser Brienne. My Lady, this is Darna.” He gestured towards the midwife. “She was just asking for further clarification of our concerns.” With that simple statement he introduced her into the discussion.

“Thank you, Darna. Both for agreeing to travel all this way and for the part you played in the recuperation of my Lord husband.” Brienne tried not to feel scrutinized as Darna assessed her form. She had never been at ease when people stared, though something told her that it was with a trained eye. She is well experienced.... The knowledge put her somewhat at ease.

“It is an honour to serve. Thank you for placing confidence in me. Especially when you have a Maester in residence.” She shot a concerned look over her shoulder at Melj who stood behind them in the hall. “How may I address you? Do you prefer Ser or M'Lady?”

“Ser is generally my preference, though I admit it seems strange given the circumstances.” The Lady Knight glanced down at her protruding abdomen, feeling very far from the powerful swordswoman that was her repute.

“My Lady will be fine.”

“Very well M'Lady, may I have permission to examine you and continue my line of questioning? It will not be invasive.”

“Of course.”

Melj tapped Jaime on the arm. “I had best go ensure Maester Bextor is otherwise engaged. Excuse me.” Smiling kindly at them, he withdrew down the hall. Jaime shut the door behind him.

“You wish to remain?” Darna enquired.

The lion folded his arms across his chest, leaning back against the wood and flashing a toothy grin. “Just try and stop me.”

Brienne rolled her eyes. “He has been a permanent fixture at my side for a week. Our bond goes beyond traditional dynamics....”

Meeting her man's gaze she silently made amends for her earlier harshness. “...My husband and I face this together.”

Crossing the room Jaime kissed her forehead, his lips so hot and firm against her flesh she envisaged them scorching a brand upon her.

“As you wish.” Weaving her fingers together she regarded the pair of them. “It is my understanding that you are both alarmed by a prophecy predicting your death during childbirth. Lord Lannister has informed me that both your Mother's perished this way.”

“That is correct.” Brienne nodded. “I cannot give you any further details - I was too young to comprehend and my Father is no longer with us.”

Darna produced a measuring string and beckoned Brienne to stand. “May I?” She nodded as Jaime carefully helped her out of her seat. This is starting to feel like one of my
bridal gown fittings....
The midwife continued to speak as she undertook a detailed evaluation of Brienne's stomach. “You are unusually tall and broad....but you are fully aware of that.”
“It hasn't escaped my attention.” She reponded wryly. “I had always operated under the assumption it would be to my benefit when bearing children, making me more sound.”
“Not necessarily so....” The woman glanced at Jaime. “Your husband is only just shy of your height. An infant is a combination of both parents, proportionate to them. Your frame would only afford you an advantage if the size of the baby was reduced by a father of a slighter build. In this case size has been exaggerated.”

Recollecting a conversation of theirs in recent weeks, Brienne bit her lip to stifle her immature amusement.
She knew if she faced Jaime in this moment her efforts would unravel. “Don't say anything. Not a single word.” She warned him.
“I haven't Wench. I'm just thinking a lot....” The mirth in his tone was palpable. Thankfully Darna ignored it, crossing her arms and staring at Brienne's belly in careful contemplation.
It increased the Lady Knight's heartrate drastically.
What is she thinking?

“Is this your first child?” The midwife, carefully prodded at her bulge, feeling and pressing.
“Yes. Though not my first pregnancy.”
“Oh?” Darna's eyebrows shot up. “I was not informed of this by Melj.”
“He doesn't know.” Jaime explained. “Does it have an impact?”
“Everything does when it comes to these matters. Was the miscarriage natural?”
The question stirred a deep ache in her chest.
“No.”
“What method was used?”
“A draught in the form of a tea.”
“Tansy - Can you recall the precise dosage in the recipe?”

Brienne swallowed, raising her chin.
She wanted to make certain Darna knew it had not been her doing. “I was given the tea unknowingly. I did not prepare the brew or know its true intention. It was strong and bitter as I recall.”
The midwife shook her head in disgust. “A deplorable act. The effects of a strong concoction of Tansy tea upon an already expectant mother can have lasting results.”
“Lady Lysa.” Jaime whispered. “There were rumours....”
“Yes.” Brienne muttered under her breath. She had heard the same during her time spent with Catelyn.
Lady Arryn suffered multiple miscarriages and stillbirths, eventually producing a sickly son. Some said it stemmed from a Tansy Tea induced abortion when she was younger.
“How quickly did the Tea take effect? This can be indicative of its strength.”
“Almost immediately but – that can have been from my injuries as well.”

“Injuries? Of what sort?”
She grimaced, hating having to relive these painful memories. Jaime stepped in to her aid.
“Brienne was surrounded by enemies who didn't want her producing my child. They had her beaten in the stomach with a sword pommel. The tea was given to complete their grisly work.”
Darna stepped back, pinching the bridge of her nose between two fingers.
That cannot be a good sign.
“Have you suffered any other traumas in the abdomen?”
Furrowing her brow the Lady Knight tried to explain. “I live the life of a warrior. I have competed in melees, taken part in battles. I would struggle to recall each time I have been dealt a blow.”
“She was kicked several times.” Her husband's voice was choked. “When we were taken prisoner.” Of course he would remember. He took each time she was wounded to heart, reproaching himself as the cause.

“M'Lord, M'Lady – please sit back down.” Side by side on the chaise, Jaime laced his fingers through her own, squeezing her hand as they drew strength from each other. Darna took a deep breath. “If I am to speak candidly....” “Please do.” Brienne encouraged. They did not need her to mince words. “....all you have told me is greatly troubling. I came here upon the summons of a Lord and Lady but I must confess when I was told your worry stemmed from a prophecy I was highly skeptical and thought you just nervous parents. Now that I am informed of your very colourful histories and have had the chance to assess M'Lady personally – my perspective has changed entirely.”

“What is your opinion?” Jaime leant forward in the seat, pulling their joined hands into his lap. “In my experience – which is vast – you have numerous reasons to be concerned. M'Lady is carrying very large, it is her first labour and therefore the body is ill-prepared. If it was a subsequent birth I would not be as alarmed. The death of your own Mother's cannot be discarded...it shows a predisposition towards complications from both sides. Then this must be coupled with the outside influences which have only just come to light. A history with a large dose of Tansy – more is used to terminate an existing pregnancy than in the preventative form of Moon Tea. We cannot know who prepared the elixir or how knowledgable they were, therefore it could have had detrimental affects on the system. It can cause bleeding and may have impaired her insides. Then there are the past injuries. From the exterior, I cannot know what damage had been done to your womb.” The midwife seemed slightly frightened as she gauged their reaction to her words.

“Your prognosis?” Jaime pressed. “I have never had patients of such power and influence before. It makes me cautious. Self-preservation would have me guard my tongue lest I be parted with my head for speaking out of turn.” “Darna...” Brienne began softly. “...We have turned to you as there is no foreseeable way out of this. I am heavily with child and therefore labour must ensue. This doom blankets us like a cloud. Speak freely, I give you my word no harm shall come to you. If these omens are correct I am lost regardless.”

The older woman weighed her options, coming to the decision to speak. “From all I've heard I think it is nothing short of a miracle that you can bear children at all-” Brienne felt the breath rush from her lungs. Jaime's nails dug sharply into the back of her hand. “...and I would deem the prophecy accurate.” All colour drained from her husband's face. Blanched white and stripped of hope. She reached across to cup his chin, thumbing his stubble. “It's alright.” She mouthed, banishing her gathering tears for his sake. “It will be alright.” Coming full circle, she found it was now her turn to spin the compassionate lie.

“I know this is not what you wanted to hear....” Darna interrupted them hastily. “...Nor are my tidings favourable. But I did not say it was without recourse.” Both Knights turned as one, their eyes burning into the midwife. “As I'm sure Melj has mentioned, I am not without my methods. If you trust.” She shifted nervously and took a seat herself. “You both have a choice to make in regards to where you will place your faith. You can let nature take its course as the Maester's suggest and throw yourselves upon the hope that this Seer is mistaken. Or - we can intervene. There are still risks but it gives you back some of the control.”
Brienne knew that Jaime would snatch hold of any alternative. He had done so before – to save his arm when he lost his hand. From the moment he barged back into Evenfall Hall divulging how he had dispatched the Swiftwind, she knew the wheels had been set in motion.

She too did not need convincing. A probable death exploring radical avenues was preferable to relinquishing herself to certain fatality. Even if she still paid with her life, she would at least know she had tried to prove Bran wrong.

In a way it would give her what she always wanted, to go down fighting.

It was as she once thought in Winterfell - she was a Knight not a conventional Lady, they needn't conform.

Her readable countenance wordlessly revealed her decision to her husband as he pulled her into a powerful embrace. “Thank you.” He murmured, kissing the shell of her ear. “If we are going to agree on one thing ever Brienne, this must be it. You can argue with me on everything else for years to come. But we must be on the same page.”

“We are.” She assured him, pleased that he had some solace.

“One more thing...” Darna chimed in. “Do either of you have siblings?”

“I have a brother.” Jaime offered, glancing down before adding. “And I had a twin sister.”

“M’Lady?”

“I am my parents only surviving child. But I had an elder brother and younger twin sisters. Why?” The midwife smiled knowingly. “No cause for anxiety - just piecing everything together.”

* * *

“Milk of the Poppy...” Darna brandished a small wooden cup, holding it out to the couple. “....with some alterations. It will do no harm to the unborn. Most will be absorbed by the Mother's system but we will work quickly to err on the side of caution.” The Lady of Tarth gestured to Jaime and he collected it reluctantly, eyeing its viscous white contents.

“Would you please give us some time.” Brienne requested quietly.

“I will not be far.” The midwife looked to Jaime. “Melj and I will be preparing. Ring for me when it is done.”

The small bell sat near the door. The same one her Father had used to bid his staff. A piece of him in the room.

Darna disappeared into the hall, clicking the door shut behind her.

The room was empty save for two tables, one small and the second very large.

Whenever Jaime beheld it, his wife noticed how he shivered.

“Sound the bell. A recurrent theme. It never precedes anything good.” He gave the liquid another glance. “Would that I had some.”

“You must be awake to know what happens.” She knew he was aware but reiterated the instructions all the same. “Have a glass of wine if you need.”

“Drinking loses its appeal when its without you. Getting all charming and red in the face. Losing inhibitions....” He sighed. “.....I may never have Dornish Red again. The smell, the flavour. It brings back so many memories.” Jaime threw his head back and squeezed his eyes shut tight. “That is how this all began wasn't it?”

“Not quite but close.”

That night had indeed ignited their physical intimacy but was just another step along their entwined road.

Wine or not, it would have happened between us sooner or later....

Sooner or later. Her mind halted on the phrase. Another theme.
It had been the question which plagued their minds once the decision to interfere with nature had been made.

Later - promised blissful procrastination, gambling by putting off the inevitable.

Giving them a chance to enjoy more of each other but also increasing the danger - their baby could decide to come of its own accord and all their plans would be for naught.

Sooner - made their stomachs churn and eyes water. Plunging in at the deep end of the ocean.

Bringing forward their potential parting and quite possibly making it come to fruition.

“What quality of time are we going to have living in constant fear?” Brienne could not endure the uncertainty any longer. She felt as though her neck hung over the headman's block and she was waiting for the blade to fall. They had already lived a week's worth of the tense night before the White Walker's marched on Winterfell. A state of being where you perpetually held your breath until your chest combusted. She was courageous and needed to know her fate.

Perching herself on the edge of the large table she managed to remain serene.

If she did indeed slip from this world today, it would be without her knowledge, transitioning peacefully into eternal slumber.

After evading the numerous torturous ends which had hunted her over the years - seldom forgettable as they revisited her in the blackness of the night in their varying horrendous forms – by comparison the actual method of her passing would be sweet and painless.

But the excruciation would come with her first and only task.

She had to bid farewell to Jaime.

Brienne mustered gratitude that it could at least be calm and on their terms.

Agony was not robbing her of articulation nor eliciting blood chilling screams as it would have if the prophecy had run its course.

*It may still have the same end but it will be a far more pleasant one.*

“Come here husband.” She commanded firmly, affection permeating her tone.

As soon as he was within arms reach she slid her hands behind his neck, rubbing circles behind his ears with her thumbs and knotting her long adroit fingers in his hair.

With the cup in his good hand he could only bow his head towards her, sharp intakes of air making his muscular shoulders rise and fall as he wrapped his right arm around her as best he could with her cumbersome size.

“How many years did we waste?” Jaime's deep voice was broken, hurting. “All that time I could have been with you. Holding you. We could have been together.”

“It unfolded the way it needed to.” She kissed the top of his golden hair, threaded by silver. “We weren't ready. We needed to grow and learn. If it happened sooner our bond wouldn't be this deep. We were shaped by our experiences Jaime. Take one away and we are bent out of our mould.”

She raised his chin, so his eyes met her own. “And in this incarnation you are perfect. There is nothing I would alter about the man I love.”

Her lion kissed her then, claiming her lips as she was devoured by both his mouth and his feelings, ingraining within her, his infinite devotion.

A maelstrom of emotion swept her up in its current. Last was an abhorrent concept.

Her last chance to surrender to his ardour, the last time to feel the tickle of his beard, the last time she could savour the taste of his tongue, the pull of his arm.

The last instance in which he would consume her every sense.

*There has to be a joyous last.* Brienne's mind grasped for it, needing motivation to prise herself away or she would remain in this limbo forevermore.

“Jaime.” In the end it was the gasp of his name that separated their lips.
She held him at bay with forceful hands on his chest, lest that riptide sink her down into a world where logic ceased and only Jaime and desire remained tangible. “This will be the last time, I ever question that you love me. From this second forward I accept it. Survive or die, be I ugly or mulish, disagreeable or stubborn. Never again will I doubt that for some incomprehensible reason – you do indeed love me.” Tears sprang to her eyes. “I know it. My Jaime, my husband - I know it.”

“I do love you Wench. There's no one else for me - nor ever will be.” Shredded. That was the only term she could conjure when she attempted to define his tone.

*I need to hearten him. Soon I will be asleep, but he will wallow on his own for hours – mayhaps forever.*

“Name me a last that you would be glad of.” Her nose drew nondescript patterns against his cheek and temple. “Give me one in return.”

Her Lord sighed, long and deep. Grappling against the same internal struggle as she. Finally he manifested an answer. “This will be our last goodbye.” He nuzzled into her neck, exhaling so a warm gust of air filtered beneath the fabric of her shift and travelled down her spine. “There have been so many...Harrenhal, King's Landing, Riverrun, Winterfell, here at Tarth.” Jaime pulled back so they were eye to eye. “After today, I will never say goodbye to you again. I swear it. When next we meet, we will never go through the torture of wondering if and when we will ever see each other again.”

“I like that vow. No more goodbyes - I will look forward to it.”

Droplets of tears saturated two sets of blonde lashes. Trapped in their fan, the warriors they stemmed from forbidding them from falling. Jaime offered her the cup. Her hand enclosed around one half of it, her fingertips meeting his. “Together.” She said.

As one they lifted the cup to her lips and she downed the chalky draught. Swallowing swiftly before they could change their mind. Jaime's dazzling eyes were the only thing which filled her vision as the room grew foggy almost instantaneously. Oblivion calling with its numbing nihility. The final words which floated to her ears were his. “I will always be yours.”

***

The light disappeared from the world as her lids shuttered those patient blue eyes which carried the glow of his soul along with her own. Tenderly he lay his wife's limp form upon the table. Caressing the back of her head and running his thumb across her bottom lip. Warm and still swollen from their kissing. Her pale flesh remaining flushed. He stepped back before it could change, convincing himself she was just sleeping.

Jaime tinkled the tiny bell, ushering in Darna. Bustling in hurriedly she declared. “You cannot stay My Lord. I know you may wish to – but it increases the chance of infection.” He nodded, they had discussed the process ahead of time. He made his departure in one step increments, dragging his leaden feet across the floorboards. His sight never straying from his wife's form until he passed into the hall.

Truth be told he did not want to remain. It was not like regular birth where he could hold her hand and coax her through, giving her an anchor in the ordeal. This was colder, inorganic. Jaime knew he would not be able to stand watching anyone work on his Brienne. See her crimson blood spilt or her skin turn cold. The thought alone tied his insides into knots. His desire to defend her would run
rampant.
He was best left alone.

* * *

Four doors down he stalked the perimeter of the room like a lion caged. He remembered seeing them during his childhood in the bowels of Casterly Rock. Jaime was certain he resembled them in this moment. A wild animal, distressed and disoriented. Far removed from the majestic beast he ought to have embodied.

An untouched flagon of wine sat upon the table, the goblet discarded beside it. Originally he thought he could mark the passing of time by counting laps, but that soon got away on him as his velocity became more frenzied. Stricken by the realisation that there could be no turning back.

* What were we thinking? How could I let them?  
This was the point in the nightmare when he generally woke up, rousing his wench with the hopes she would distract him. But the sleep which claimed Brienne was induced and the likelihood of her waking....

He sank into a chair, offering a prayer to the Seven, clasping his left hand to his stump.

Warrior - give might to her body.
Maiden – protect our innocent.
Smith – forge me a new heart, for mine will be irreparable if I lose her.
Crone - lead her back to me.
Stranger – fuck off. She is mine, not yours.
Mother - have mercy....please, please have mercy. Let her experience your wonder, let my Brienne live to hold our baby.
Father – if I have failed my other children. Please do not let me fail this one. No matter what happens....

The sconces cast long shadows. Their fire both sustaining and consuming life. Symbolising both passion and destruction.
Brienne was a blaze in his veins, the flames within his chest.

I love her.
Gods, I love her.
And I will love our baby.
Find it in your hearts to spare them.
Please....

A shrill wail echoed down the hall, startling him to his feet.
The unmistakable cries of a newborn babe...
Evenstars

Chapter Notes

The end is nigh as I stare at my laptop screen with one more chapter to go after this one and try to remember what I did with my life before I started writing this fic. I may be getting choked up right now....

Sunrise tinted the sky with hues of amber as it slowly awakened the Isle of Tarth. As the land and ocean stirred it brought with it the vibrant blue tones he had come to cherish, saturating the panorama and painting the world in sapphire. Jaime watched from the balcony doorway, leaning against the brick and closing his eyes.

Birdsong trilled beyond the chamber, backed by the constant lapping of waves and a new note in the symphony – the softs coos of an infant.

Jaime returned inside the dim room, letting his eyes adjust. Marking the rise and fall of his wife's chest as she slumbered.

"It will take hours for the effects to wear off and she will be in pain - let her rest." Darna had urged the panicked Lord. “She lost a considerable amount of blood but she is well.”

Even so, Jaime had not strayed from her bedside throughout the night. Anxiously touching her cheek, checking it had not grown cool or clammy.

Gradually his pulse had calmed – his wife lived. But his trepidation would not alleviate until she was conscious.

Striding down past the foot of her bed, he reached into the crib to stroke downy blonde hair.

"Shhhh, sweetling.” He soothed, in hushed tones. “You should be asleep.”

A groggy moan sounded from behind him, so faint and imperceptible had it not been for the silent stillness of the morn it would have gone unnoticed.

Jaime flew to her bedside in long strides.

"Brienne...” He leant over the bed, careful not to disturb the mattress and caressed her cheek, smiling at his own naughtiness.

I am not disobeying orders persay, she did make a noise as if rousing.

“Wake up my love.”

“Jai...me...” Her voice was parched and dry. Pouring a scant amount of water from a nearby pitcher onto a cloth, he held it to her lips.

“Here – just a dribble. Sorry it can't be more.” Dripping tiny buds upon her tongue he bade her to swallow, careful not to choke her on the liquid.

His wife took a deep breath and winced. Slowly fluttering open those astonishing eyes and allowing the last of his tension to dissipate.

Jaime's smile grew broader, it overtook his face in euphoric delirium. “There you are.”

He placed a kiss upon her lips and brushed the strands of hair from her forehead.

So many blondes in this room....

“I cannot be....beaten that easily.” She smirked at him. “I'm too stubborn.”

Favouring her with the quizzical raising of an eyebrow, he teased. “You don't expect me to dispute that do you?”

Her laugh came out as more of a rasp and she screwed her eyes shut tight in pain.
They flew open again as it triggered her to remember the reason she was incapacitated. “The baby?”

Jaime grinned as he glanced towards the crib, wordlessly letting her know all was well before returning his steady gaze to his wife's face. All night he had nothing to do but picture this moment. Plan what he would say. He lovingly ran the back of a curled finger over the contours of her face, from chin, to cheek, to temple. Noting the way her nerves twitched in excited anticipation of his answer. She observed him as intently as he did her. Briefly biting his lip to keep from chuckling he proclaimed. “They are fine.”

Her expression was more priceless than all the riches in the Westerlands and Reach combined. The lion would never forget it as long as he lived and he suspected even thereafter. Azure orbs turned to widened marbles, mouth parting in shock. “They?!” “Yes Wench.” He pressed his lips to hers again as they beamed into each other. “Our twins.”

* * *

Her husband often likened her to a lioness and Brienne looked the part to her very essence as she soaked in the rays. Radiating joyously as she inhaled the fresh air from the position where she lounged. Springtime sun and a gentle seaside breeze welcomed her to the outdoors for the first time in over a fortnight. The marbled columns of the railings the only thing obstructing her expansive view of the straits and island that their little family called home.

Upon Jaime's instruction the staff had brought cushioned furniture out onto the main balcony, allowing her to taste the salt and freedom. He had been so considerate and supportive in her recovery that she had stifled every urge to complain. It was a slow rehabilitation, days crawled as she suffered through immobility, waiting for her flesh to knit, accompanied by Darna's constant checking for signs of inflammation. Finally, Brienne could see the evidence that she was on the mend. Her pain eased overnight and her body was gradually healing. She yearned to move and feel herself again. Keen to begin her new existence as a Mother in a more hands on capacity than just feeding and cuddling her babies. But she knew she must have patience. Setting herself back would only further frustrate. Besides, they are more than worth it....

The Lady Knight gazed down upon her baby son, nestled in the crook of her arm. He slept peacefully, swaddled in his creamy golden blanket. Tiny embroidered sigils - lions, starbursts and crescents bordering the edges. A gift from Uncle Tyrion. Her boy was very much his Father in smaller form. Golden blonde hair and eyes that promised to deepen to an emerald green. Jaime said he had her soft cheeks and high forehead but she couldn't see it. Everyone who laid eyes upon him knew he was a Lannister. At least her little Lord's frame was indisputably Tarth – excessively long legs were partnered with his larger size. He was a tranquil babe, favouring slumber and possessing a voracious appetite. Darna had said he was born first, technically making him their heir. Not that it mattered to either of them. They treated them both equally.

Already Brienne could not believe how much her heart had grown to accommodate the two new loves in her life but still with such unbridled adoration towards her husband. She would never have thought it possible if she were asked before, but somehow she loved Jaime even more intensely when she watched him in his new role as Father to her children.
Tears had slipped down his face the first time he held them, bringing his babies to his chest and telling them he was their Father. She had strained from her bed in order to kiss his cheek and Darna had reprimanded her severely. It was worth the resulting pain to stretch up to him, whispering in his ear that they were his and he could hold them, claim them and love them for the rest of their lives.

He melted her heart as she watched him now, enveloped in the golden beams and walking the length of the balcony. Attention completely enrapt in his daughter. The marginally smaller bundle was swathed in the blue version of the blanket – as per Jaime’s insistence. Arguing when all the staffers naturally assumed that the cerulean blanket would be for the boy. “No.” He was adamant. “Like her Mother, it will match her eyes.”

The Lady of Tarth had been afraid when she learnt she had borne a daughter. Terrified that she had passed on her curse of plain unattractive features and would have to shield her from a life of scorn. Her fears had been unfounded. Their little girl did have aspects of her mother - the most notable being her enormous blue eyes, about which Jaime had been elated. Her hair was a lighter shade, more white blonde like Brienne's own and in similarity to her brother she was long of limb. But she had inherited the Lannister features, the stunning profile of her Father. And a good helping of his personality....

Brienne chuckled to herself as she watched them. Their little Lady was seldom quiet. When she cried she roared. When she was lain down she whined and she was almost impossible to settle to sleep. It was only being exaggerated by the constant attention lavished upon her by her Father at the slightest squeak or protest. Like right now....

Jaime rocked her in his arms, grinning and pacing, hoping the motion would lull her into slumber. When his track brought them near she caught snatches of the lullaby he had chosen to sing to their daughter. “....The bear, the bear and the maiden fair....”

In her mind’s eye she saw her prisoner, goading her with songs like ‘Six Maids in a Pool’. Heard the mocking strains from the throats of the outlaws, as her future husband flung himself into the bear pit alongside her. These memories no longer contained the undercurrents of sinister dread they once had, instead they were anecdotes which they would one day tell their twins.

“Jaime!” The Lady Knight called. “If you keep fussing over her like this she will never be able to settle herself.”

Her husband strode over to where she and their son rested, tickling their daughters chin with one finger as he rearranged her blanket left handed. Ever cocksure he gave her a mischievous grin. “You sound quite jealous.” Brienne knew the answer he wanted to hear. “I do, don't I?”

Bending down, he captured her lips in a playful kiss, nearly disturbing their son. “Don't wake him!” She twinkled even as she scolded. “Then we will have two who are not napping according to routine.” “So regimented.” Pecking his son on the head, Jaime alighted across from her, scooting his own chair over so their knees were threaded together. “Our little soliders do not realise they are
breaking rank, apologies Commander.”
“Speak for your own little soldier, I have mine well and truly in hand.”
“You chose the easy one.”
“You spoil her!”
Brienne’s entire system spilled over with happiness. If her biggest problem in the world was that her husband was too enamoured with his children, she lived an enviable life indeed. Kissing her fingertip she touched it to her son’s nose, repeating the process for her daughter.

“I’m ready to strike a deal.” She announced, ensnaring her Lord Husband’s focus.
“And what bargain, pray tell are you proposing Wench?” He sat still as their baby girl finally began to drift off, sleepiness winning out.
“An agreement about that topic we have been debating.” She narrowed her eyes at him, waiting for him to catch on.
“Ahhhh.” He nodded seeming pleased. “First or House?”
“First – the latter may take us years.”
“Really Lady Lannister?”
“Don’t start! Or I will be like to call you Lord Tarth.”
“Nonsense. We are a lieges, my family carries the higher claim. You are my wife, you are a Lannister.”
“Really? Where do you sit right now? Not the Rock. But at Evenfall Hall, on Tarth. The Evenstars do not carry the name of Lannister.”
“The Evenstars have never married Lions before.”
They huffed at each other reaching another impasse.

“You were saying?” Jaime encouraged, breaking the silence.
She loved how they could argue without animosity. Engaging more in a battle of wills than anything else.
It had been the first hallmark of them and their relationship, evident from their earliest of exchanges and yet still it remained. Unaltered but now laced with love.

“The twins. We have to give them names Jaime, we can’t keep calling them son and daughter.”
“Then its simple! Let me name them and all our problems will be solved.” She knew he was teasing but beneath his jovial off-handed comment lay the desperate desire to have this experience. They had wanted to share it, but seeing eye to eye had become a difficulty.

Brienne was a traditionalist, she favoured names steeped with heritage, history and family. Respectability and common sense reigned supreme.
Jaime was more sentimental. He wanted to forge their own legacy and begin a story unique to them. Starting anew with names that meant something to their journey.

“One each.” The Lady Knight countered. “We name one child a piece and agree not to question or interfere with the selection of the other...providing the choice is not outlandish.” She added the last part as an afterthought, shooting Jaime with a dubious look.
“Trust - My Lady. It is something we have had since our rather unforgettable bath.” He extended out his left hand for her to shake. “I accept the terms of your truce.”

She joined her hand with his, their other arms cradling their heirs.
“Are you content to name who we hold? Or shall we draw lots for the respective honours to be fair?” Ever just, she would obey his desires if he insisted upon the allocation being random, though she secretly harboured a hope she would get to name their golden son. He sensed her preference and in that instant she realised his own matched her suspicions.

“I am content to be assigned the babe in my arms.”
She breathed a sigh of relief. *Finally we agree on something.*

“So my Brienne.” He reached over and stroked their little Lordling's head. “Who is this to be? Do not pretend for one second you have to think on it. You wouldn't have put forward this idea if you had not planned your choices in advance.”

Jaime knew her too well.

“Selwyn.” She breathed. “He will be named after my Father.”

“I was prepared for that, it makes perfect practical sense. I could almost see it floating around that noble mind of yours.” Her husband kissed her forehead. “I grew very close to your Father. He did a great deal for us. I am glad for my son to be named after him.”

In a quiet moment later she would tell him her deeper reasoning. That for her there could be no other name. This son had been foretold.

“He was tall. Easily your height. *But his face was unmistakably Lannister, he had their eyes...*”

Time had twisted the circumstances of his creation, giving rise to further tragedies - but ever determined that he would indeed exist.

The first instance saw him as the result of their affair in Winterfell. His destiny cruelly derailed by the wolves' fangs and fears.

The second time around, they had been convinced, would only come at the cost of her life. An incentive placed to choose differently and end him before he'd begun.

But divination had never been an exact science, not even in Bran Stark's hands.

Only the Seven had the power to write the manuscript for the ages and they didn't appreciate the interference of meddling mortals hungry for power, attempting to divert their plans.

*Thank you.* They had her sincerest appreciation.

“And our daughter?” Brienne steeled herself for his choice.

*I will support him no matter his decision, he deserves this.*

“You are truly letting me?” Jaime favoured her with the sweetest smile of disbelief and she felt her insides once again liquify to molten.

“Of course. She's yours.”

He nodded eagerly and swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. “I really did think about this....we have come such a long way. But there has been one constant-”

Her husband was reflective, immersed in distant memories. “From when I first noticed your eyes, sitting across from me in a boat on the Trident, to you telling me about Tarth and that chilling night in the woods. I ask you Wench, when exactly did we fall in love? Can we pinpoint a moment? Did it come down to a word?” He leaned back and regarded her, seeing if she could chase his line of thought and find the same conclusion. “Now we are here together on your Isle, where I slipped a ring upon your finger. Married, victorious, having outmaneuvered all our enemies and it was thanks to a plan. A ruse which hinged upon this same word.”

Brienne knew then and her husband had it right.

The answer dawned upon her brighter than the jewels which gleamed in Oathkeeper's hilt and she smiled.

Jaime was incandescent. “Her name is Sapphire.”
“Uncle Tyrion!” She was cat quick for a girl of eight but nobody would describe her as genteel. She almost bowled over the King in her rush, closing the distance in effortless bounds afforded by her long lanky legs. Quirking her head to the side, she looked down at him with amusement. “I'm taller than you now!”

“I can see that.” The Imp chuckled. Jaime was glad his brother took it in good humour. “Sapphire, tact please!” His wife huffed at the effort of instilling politeness in their daughter. “We are in King's Landing now.”

“I was just telling the truth. You tell us to be honest!” She was constantly flabbergasted by how easily her mouth got her into trouble.

They swiftly caught up with her at the top of the stairs and Jaime smiled at his brother. “You are going to regret this offer.”

“Not in the slightest.” Tyrion assured. “They will be the most entertaining thing that's been in this Keep for almost a decade...well since you actually.”

The lion laughed. It had been two years since the King had made the voyage to Tarth and neither child had visited the capital before.

“Wyn, you remember your Uncle?” Brienne prompted the handsome boy beside her. He stood stock straight with a serious mien but kind smile, bowing deeply as he greeted his relative. “Good afternoon Your Grace. Thank you for inviting us.”

“Lord Selwyn, you are most welcome.”

“Please forgive my sister, she is very excitable and forgets herself sometimes.” Sapphire's mouth dropped open indignantly. “Did I ask you to say anything?”

Selwyn strode confidently past his sister, the faintest hint of a Lannister smirk playing on his lips. “You forgot that he's a King, didn't curtsy and called him short. You should be thanking me for covering for you.”

“The Night's King will return and the Mad Queens will claw their way out of their crypts before I go thanking you!”

“Jaime...” Brienne mouthed, throwing both hands up in exasperation. “Wench, that's mild from her. Save your energy for when she's clobbering him.”

“For goodness sake, don't mention that!” She hissed. “Tyrion will change his mind and we need this break.”

“Well her mouth is entirely yours.”

“I am sensing that the children bicker?” The King interrupted, levelling them with a pointed gaze. “They have been known to.” Brienne confessed, chin held high in defiant defence of her young. Sarcasm dripped from Tyrion's voice as he quipped. “Truly shocking. I cannot begin to imagine where they learnt to communicate in such a manner.”

Jaime had to stifle his amusement lest it encourage them.

“Shall we My Lady?” Lacing his hand with Brienne's they began a slow walk through the castle halls, which were both familiar and yet so different. A relic from another lifetime. Selwyn eyed the large rooms and doorways with burning curiosity, whilst Sapphire kicked at the carpet mats trying to contain her energy.
“Can they go explore?” Jaime asked his brother.
“Certainly, let them run and play. It will give the adults a chance to talk.”

Both children lifted their heads excitedly at the prospect. “Go on.” Jaime waved his stump dismissively and they took off quicker than a crossbow bolt.
“Stay together!” Brienne ordered as they disappeared from sight. Slumping her shoulders she looked at her good-brother. “Greetings, your Grace. With the children to commandeering I didn't get the chance to say it earlier.”
“We are family. No need to stand on ceremony. I am just glad to have you all here.”

Entering a brightly lit solar they arranged themselves on various seats, accepting tea and wine as it was served. Once the attendants had exited, Tyrion wasted no time in beginning their conversation.
“So – an anniversary tour of the Riverlands. Sounds quite the adventure.”
“It serves several purposes.” The Lady Knight explained. “We want to retrace our steps under more pleasant circumstances. Our planned route stops at Harrenhal before tracking the Trident. From there we will be travelling to the Westerlands.”
“Brienne has never been to Casterly Rock.” Jaime ventured. “I thought it best after all these years that she visits my childhood home. It is our ancestral seat and one day may belong to one of those rowdy cubs you encountered earlier.” He exchanged a sly grin with his Lady Wife at the mention of their offspring.

Tyrion’s eyes darted between them, puzzling it out. “Am I missing something?”
“My wife and I are in discussions about expanding our family.”
The King was pleased but looked concerned. “Is that still on the table? Not to be impolite but after the trials you encountered with the delivery of the twins I presumed your brood was complete.”

“I am not getting any younger so any decisions that we make now must be definite.” Brienne inhaled deeply. “On our way here, we made port at the Infirn and I went to see Darna. She believes that after so many years my body will have recovered enough that it will be safe if we wished to try again. Darna and Melj are both aging and have volunteered to come live with us for the duration of my term should we proceed.”

“And the prophecy?”
“I will not lie, it still frightens me. Anything concerning my Brienne’s wellbeing does.” The Lion of Lannister spoke plainly with his brother. “But we have had ample time to study it. We have turned the circumstances and his phrasing over and over, analysing every which way. Both of us are confident that the threat has passed. The son which he referred to was most certainly Wyn.”

At this the monarch grew more attentive, steepling his fingers in thought. “You both realise my offer to mind the twins was as much for observation as it was generosity?”
“Why brother? Are you implying an ulterior motive?” Jaime performed his best impression of aghast whilst his Lady Knight rolled her eyes.
“My intention for your children remains the same, as you are both well aware. This will be an invaluable opportunity for me to get to know their natures in person, but first I entreat you - tell me about them.”

Brienne met Jaime’s eyes, pride permeating her pores in such a way it caused his own chest to swell. He sat slightly taller in his seat, mentally carving another tally in favour of ‘yes’ for a subsequent pregnancy. Motherhood was extremely becoming on his Wench and they positively adored their twins.
Of course being parents could be a trial – the combination of both their hard headed ways intermingling in the blood of their issue was never going to produce submissive docile lackwits. But for each of their faults there were a plethora of endearing qualities and Jaime embraced them
for it with all his heart. To him they could do no wrong, a fact which Brienne needled him about as it shepherded her into the no-nonsense role. Her lion would simply reply, “You hoodwink yourself Commander – I watched you with Podrick. When was it ever going to be another way?”

He would kiss the stern crease from her brow, watching her steely persona dissolve to reveal the warm affectionate woman who hid beneath. Feeling her unravel beneath his ministrations and praying to the Seven that both children were engaged in various pursuits elsewhere. Living on an island meant limited privacy and the twins had an inherent knack for interrupting their parents more intimate moments.

*Hence the need for this trip if we are to focus on conceiving...*

He had endured a month of abstinence as Brienne allowed her body to cleanse itself of its ritualistic dosages of Moon Tea. Although their decision had yet to be wrought in stone, it was easier for her to begin taking the elixir again than it was to ensure optimal conditions for fertility.

Jaime for one, was very much looking forward to playing his part.

“Well...?” Tyrion prompted, jolting him from his daydream of bed rolls and passion. His wife regarded him with a contemplative stare. “Where were you?”

“Somewhere you wouldn't want me confessing in front of my brother.” They had become lovers in the distant grey depths of Winter and been married since the Spring - yet Jaime was delighted he could still bring a blush to her cheeks. He would never tire of watching the scalding pink blotch her ivory complexion and knowing he was the cause.

“Did you ask me something?” He struggled to remind himself, having been caught out on his wandering fancies. “Right! The children. What would you like to know?”

“Their traits, their habits, what they enjoy doing. Give me some parental insight before it is left to my own deductions.”

“Wyn is a respectful boy.” The Lady Knight began. “He is obedient, thoughtful and has an innate sense of what is right.”

“His moral compass is entirely Brienne's.” Jaime volunteered, provoking a snort from his younger sibling. “For which the world is truly grateful. Even if it means he is stubborn as an ox. The Tarth traits run strong in him.”

Wrinkling her nose in his direction she continued. “He is not to be underestimated though. Selwyn appears temperate and calm but he is clever....” She spoke with a Mother's wisdom. “...As you saw earlier the trademark Lannister confidence resides within, he just knows when and how to use it.”

“Generally aimed at Saph.” He added.

The King nodded. “And how would you describe her?”

“Oh.” Brienne sighed. “She is all Jaime. Sent to try and vex me at every given turn.”

The Lord of Lannister laughed heartily. “Be lenient Wench, you run a tight ship. She is just spirited.”

“Sapphire is wilful, quick of tongue and generally impossible but within she has a kind heart and is incredibly honest.” She gave him a sidelong glance. “Just like her Father.”

Jaime leant across and kissed his wife's cheek. They loved and respected each other's differences to this day and it was captivating to watch the same process play out with their children.

“Our girl is like her mother in one way-” He glowed with pride. “-She is phenomenal with a blade. They both are.”

“They possess your talents?” Tyrion was quite enthused at the prospect. “You must realise Ser Brienne, I grew up watching Jaime's gifted skills at swordplay. Then you are revered throughout Westeros in your own right. To imagine your offsprings' capabilities is earnestly thrilling.”

The lion did not need encouragement to launch into detailing their feats.

“My wife has been inspiring - she drilled them from the instant their arms were strong enough to
“Hold a Tourney sword.”
He felt her large hand tenderly wrap around his forearm, giving it a reassuring squeeze. She was not going to let him give her all the credit.

“Jaime has been instrumental as well - once I had instilled the basic disciplines we have alternated training them, so they could develop a combination of both our styles. They have steel greatswords fashioned in their proportionate size and progressed to the usage of them rapidly.”

“Brienne ensures they study the technical aspects of fighting and strategy. They must focus on footwork, stance and tactics…”

“And they can fight with either hand, right or left.” They were looking at each other now instead of the King. Eyes alight with mutual admiration. “A wise contribution of their Father's.”

“They are fully committed to their training, it is never met with difficulty or argument. The twins have always been drawn to the yard like we are.”

“It was true from the womb… And Your Grace, I ask that you ensure they continue their practice in our absence.” His wife was firm. “I must insist. We may be away for a lengthy period and I would not want their attentions to waver. Although I am certain both children would be very vocal on the subject. As Jaime said, they look forward to it daily and would feel a pinch at the lack of it.”

“The Castle Master at Arms has already been informed that he must devote hours to their tutorage.” Tyrion put her mind at ease.

The Lady Knight nodded her thanks. “This is one of our hesitancies with having another child.” She divulged. “It will take me away from their instruction for a year at least and then there is our promise to them….”

“What promise is that? May I enquire?” His younger brother had always been a curious creature.

“We have pledged our Valyrian Swords to them on the day they earn their Knighthood.” Jaime explained. “Oathkeeper and Widow’s Wail are to be inherited by the twins. If we have another child, their equal cannot be proffered and it hardly seems fair.”

“I can make some enquiries, I am the King, surely that carries some sway… mayhaps we can obtain one. Your two blades were hardly ethically sourced.”

A decidely impish grin appeared on his face and Jaime instinctively knew the next question would be impudent. “You have told me of their abilities but have been very diplomatic in your parental impartiality. I am an Uncle, I can ask things I’m not supposed to – so, who is the better fighter? Surely in their bouts there must be a victor?” He raised his eyebrows.

“That is like asking who is better out of the Wench and I!”

“But still I ask it.”

Brienne shook her head. “I cannot give you a decisive answer because it is according to circumstance. They are both unbeaten against other trainees at Evenfall. When they verse each other Sapphire emerges triumphant more often than her brother - but that is because we observe him holding back.”

Jaime stated his agreement. “He measures his blows. He does not wish to harm his sister. When comparing them all I can say is; he is stronger, she is faster. I look forward to them trying their steel against some Squires here and seeing their full potential.”

A whirlwind of commotion flurried through the doorway, Jaime recognised the voice of his son, slightly raised in panic.

“Saph put it back!” Selwyn commanded. “You will get us into trouble and we only just arrived.”

“I’m not hurting anything, I just want to look at it.” Her tone was as unapologetic as always, completely unfazed by her brothers concern.

“You’re not supposed to touch it let alone take it!”

“Lighten up Wyn, our Uncle is the King and our parents owned this book. I think we can do what we want.” It was only now Jaime noticed that she clutched a large heavy tome to her chest.

“Sapphire.” Brienne's tone had a deadly edge of warning. “What is that?”
“The White Book.” He had to give it to his daughter, she was blatantly upfront even to her detriment.
“I told her not to.” Selwyn shook his head and shrugged defeatedly in his Father's direction. “Take it back - now.” The Lady Knight growled.
“But I want to read it...will you show me your pages?” Sapphire pointedly ignored her Mother's withering stare. Toying with fire in a way only an innocent child could. Jaime suppressed a chuckle, it was not many who could face down his wife when she was so clearly seething.

“Saph...” He coaxed, trying to diffuse. “Don't answer your Mother back, its impolite and you shouldn't have taken the Book from the White Sword Tower. Now give it to me.....” He held out his left hand. Brienne seemed pleased that he was supporting her, taking the task of reprimanding upon his own shoulders for once. Even if he had softened the rebuke considerably. “Fine.” His daughter huffed in disappointment, depositing it in her Father's arms.

Jaime jutted out his lip in an exaggerated pout aimed at his wife. “She just wanted to read our entries. She is proud of us.”
“I would like to see them too...” Selwyn chimed in. “But I would have asked first.”
“Go ahead then, indulge them further.” The Lady Knight sighed, muttering under her breath. “Rewarding irreverent behaviour - now I truly know I am outnumbered by Lannisters.”
The King had hidden behind his hand during the chaos, attempting to disguise his levity.

“Quick! Sit down before she changes her mind.” Jaime raised himself out of the chair and patted the cushions. Walking to his wife, he offered her the book. “You were always better with your letters – I think you should be the one who shows them.” She smiled and graciously accepted, standing to kiss him tenderly, her bottom lip dragging across his bearded chin which grew ever more chased with silver. Communicating to him how much she appreciated the gesture. He watched her position herself between his two cubs, balancing the mighty tome on her lap.

“You truly are happy aren't you?” Tyrion enquired from beside him.
“Each day I think I may burst from it.” Jaime's eyes never left his family as he lowered himself into the chair next to his brother. “What about you?”
“Well...I have all the wine I can drink, all the whores I can bed and after nearly nine years on the throne I am still alive.” He raised his chalice in mock toast. “I can't complain.”
Lifting his own goblet and taking a sip, he studied the angles of his wife's face as she highlighted the different penmanship in the book. Pointing out the differences between entries on his page. The scene was utterly enchanting.

“May I ask you a sensitive question?” The King queried.
“Since when have you ever asked permission?”
“This is a touchy one.”
“Go on.” Jaime was intrigued.
“Do you ever worry about them?” He inclined his head towards the children. “You know – the closeness of twins shall we say.”
“Oh.” The implication hit him like a brick in the face. Which is precisely what it ultimately resulted in. “No. They are not like that and I've put in measures since the beginning just in case.”
“You did?”
“Hypocritically so - yes. They have never spent a night in the same room together, let alone the same bed. Their chambers are at opposite ends of the stronghold and I keep close watch over them.” He grimaced at his brother, calling to mind his own follies long discarded into the shadows of his past. “Besides, we have nothing to fear. They are not bonded like twins, their behaviours are very brother and sister. The only time they truly enjoy spending together is when one is whalloping the other with a sword.”
“I'm relieved to hear it.”
“You and I both.”

A young woman entered through one of the arched doorways. She was wiry and dressed in worn leathers, her straight shoulder length brown hair hanging loosely about her face. A swordbelt was fastened around her hip and she grinned playfully as she surveyed the scene in the room, her gaze coming to rest on the book across his wife's knees. “I found it!” She hollered in a most unladylike manner to someone unseen beyond the room before fixing her firey brown eyes upon him. “Hey Jackanapes.”

The sound of his nickname roused the attention of the children who squealed in excitement, leaping off the chair and almost sending the priceless tome clattering to the floor. Brienne reflexively grabbed it mid air and exhaled in relief.

“Nessa!” A twin affixed themselves to each side of her as she laughed and tried to shake them off. “Did you miss us? What's it like here?” Questions were thrown at her literally from the left and right. “Are you a Knight yet? Have you killed anyone?” “Whoah! Slow it down, one question at a time. Was I this full on?” “Worse.” The Lady of Tarth told her. “It is good to see you Nessa.”

Little Miss Spitfire had departed Evenfall at the tender age of fourteen. It had been arranged during the last visit of the King's Household when she had been offered a position as a Squire and jumped at the chance. She had become quite the swordswoman and most certainly had the wits to match. The only downside was that the twins missed her dearly, she had been a good friend to them during their early childhood. Jaime could hear the sound of a male voice calling but struggled to make out the words. Nessa groaned in impatience and yelled out even louder. “Payne! I told you it's in here!”

Brienne raised her eyebrows in her husband's direction and he bit his lips to keep his expression neutral. The Lord Commander entered a few moments later bowing deeply and beaming at the sight of them. “My Lady Ser.” Rising to her feet, she swept her former Squire into a hug, releasing him as she explained. “Sapphire thought she would borrow the White Book for some light reading. I do apologise.” “No harm done.” Pod replied calmly. “I'm just relieved it hasn't been taken. I had quite the shock when I noticed it missing.”

“My Lady Ser.”

Stepping out of the children's grasp she continued to berate him. “Who in Seven Hells would want to steal that dusty old thing? It's not like it would fetch a price.” “The White Book is irreplacable, I can't have it disappear on my watch.” “Other Lord Commanders have lost King's or killed em -" She shot an apologetic look in Jaime's direction, “Not to cause offence Jackanapes.”

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The lion shrugged unperturbed, too engrossed in watching their interaction to care. “-and you think you're gonna lose your head over a piece of parchment?” She bowed to the King as if she just noticed him. “Your Grace – permission to throttle him?” “Perhaps after one of those other things you mentioned befall me. In that case I grant you leave in advance to physically vent your frustrations upon him...” There was a hint of suggestion within Tyrion's tone. “But until such time I do require my Lord Commander.” Pod just stood their staring at her with a big goofy smile on his face whilst she groused.

The children grew restless with the grown up conversation. “Lord Commander...” Selwyn stood boldly in front of Podrick, all blonde charm and easy grins. He already reached the Knight's shoulder height. “Will you test your steel against me? You too were trained by my Mother but last I saw you I was too young.”
The suggestion spurred Sapphire to action, she tugged on Nessa's hand. “Want to duel? I brought my sword! I'm taller now, I bet I can beat you.”

The young woman didn't hesistate. “Challenge accepted! If your Mother agrees. Ser Brienne?” Jamie was warmed that his wife remained the only person to which Nessa truly deferred. She had always idolized the Lady Knight.

Brienne happily nodded. “See that the staff have unpacked your swords – they are in their wooden chests.”
“Are you certain My Lady?” Podrick had been dumbfounded by Wyn's tenacity, unsure how to respond.
“It's fine Pod. I trust you both - and if anything I should be concerned for you. My children take no prisoners.”
Selwyn beamed exuberantly. “Thank you. Mother, Father will you come watch?”
“We will in a little while. After you've completed a few warm up bouts.” Jaime promised.
“It may be a wait.” The Lord Commander informed them. “The Archers currently have the yard.”
“We'll tell them to move.” Sapphire declared. “Archers are cowards anyway. A real solider uses a sword.”
“Saph...what have I told you about repeating things your Father says?” Brienne chuckled.
“But there were no curse words in that one!”

Jaime picked his daughter up from behind, evoking a startled squeak as he deposited her in front of the doorway. “Now you are getting us both in trouble. Go find your steel.” He clapped Wyn on the back. “You too.”
The twins exited, happy chatter about their imminent victory drifting on the air behind them.

Podrick moved to follow. “If you'll excuse me, I have to go change into my practice armour.”
“Don't want to get that pristine white cloak dirty, hey Pod?” Jaime couldn't resist teasing him.
The Lord Commander nodded. “It is traditional but not practical. You would know that well Ser.”
Nessa caught his arm on the way out. “About your armour...you might wanna clean it before you put it on. Or maybe you could just wear leathers. Oh! And hone this for me would you.”
She withdrew her sword from its scabbard and handed it to him. “I'm gonna go help the twins. They don't know their way around the Keep.” She thumped him twice on the shoulder. “Thank-you Payne, appreciate it!”
Pod watched her go with the same dreamy smile. Clutching her sword in his gloved hands he flushed slightly before making his departure.

Jaime allowed himself the laughter which had been bubbling up in his chest. “Who exactly is the Squire in that situation?”
“I have no words.” His wife shook her head in bemusement. “I am uncertain whether to be pleased or appalled.”
“Why? This is your fault Wench, you set him up for a life answering to a strong willed woman!”
“That is only the half of it.” Tyrion sniggered. “I have a sinking feeling I may lose my Lord Commander in the not too distant future. He is quite besotted.”
“Podrick and Nessa?” Brienne weighed it in her mind. “I suppose it is not improbable, I would be glad for Pod to have someone. They could settle on Tarth...”
“She would have to earn her Knighthood first.” Jaime interjected. “That girl has aspirations.”
“Would you both stop planning to take away another one of my Kingsguard!” His brother complained. “That damn Island of yours claims everyone I care about. I will not be left here alone. I will rewrite the rules if I have to.”
Jaime imbued his voice with mock sympathy as he replied. “Believe me Tyrion, after the length of time you are about to spend with my twins – you will wish for peace and solitude.”

* * *
A Summer night's breeze buffeted the pavilion, fluttering its drapery of red and blue. The fabric billowed in its gusts, straining the architecture, the rope fastenings at the bottom holding strong. It carried the scent of the nearby Trident, the moisture flowing through the cracks and filling the interior with its cool ambience.

Brienne barely heard nor felt it, the heat she and her husband were generating in their makeshift bed would have caused her skin to dot with perspiration even if it had been a blizzard.

Jaime lipped the beads of salt from the long white column of her neck and she moaned. Biting at his earlobe with such fervour she was sure to leave a mark.

“Where did you find this beast?” His voice was husky as he baited her. “Though I suspect she was always haboured within, hiding behind a maiden's persona.”

“Quiet Kingslayer.” She rolled him over onto his back, dragging her teeth across his chest.

Their tour was everything she had hoped for and more. Jaime made them stop at every landmark, reminiscing about their journey. Their retinue were kept at a distance, necessary for protection but unwelcome to disturb their privacy. The baths at Harrenhal had been a highlight, the bear pit a sobering reminder of how they'd danced with death. Tonight was their last stop before they turned for the Westerlands...but this place perhaps held the most meaning.

Their tent had been erected in the exact location of his cage. The place where Jaime had been held prisoner, trussed up and awaiting his fate. In the dark of the night she had first glimpsed the mighty Lion of Lannister and he had taunted her in return. Both unknowing at the time, that it would become the profound turning point of their lives – the moment they met their match and mate.

Jaime seized upon her distraction to flip her back over. Pinning her under him in their lovers duel. She knotted her hand in his hair as his tongue plundered her mouth. *This glorious eve may be the night he fills me with our next child...* Brienne would welcome it. The poetry of the significance would not be lost on either of them. Though it was entirely possible she could already be expecting after their many other nights of ardour...

“Wench.” His sonorous tones of pleasure made her glad they were far from company. With only grass and sky to witness they could cry out, gasp and pant each others names into the heaven's and the night without fear of judgment. Free to be themselves, at one with their love and nature, rapturous and wild.

It had just been them wandering these Riverlands once, reliant solely upon each other. Now it was them alone again. Two against the world, a couple united body, heart and spirit.

“Brienne...” Her husband stilled above her, bracing himself against his hand and stump, staring deeply into her eyes. When blue met green their magnetic bond could produce currents more static that the lightning which ripped through the sky in the Stormlands. Illuminating her world and charging her from within. “If you had the choice to start over....from the precise second that we met, on this very spot, knowing all the struggles and heartache to come. Would you still follow the same road? Would you choose me and our life together?”

At his words her mind was transported back to the Great Hall in Winterfell, where Jaime Lannister had stood to trial. It was a decision purely driven by emotion as she pushed her chair back, raising herself from the side table. Words tumbling out her mouth in an effort to defend the object of her desires, in the same breath unwittingly revealing her uncontainable love. The gamechanger was in that instant, when prior loyalties could be damned and all that mattered was sparing her Jaime. “You would fight beside him?” Lady Stark had asked with ice in her veins.

A simple enough question but it held such weight and gravity.

In her response was the truth, the statement that shifted everything as she and Jaime became intrinsically bound. From the moment her hands touched that wooden table, propelling her up to
speak for him, to vouch for him, their destiny's and legacies were tied and all other vows fell away into insignificance.

My answer was the same then, as it is now....

She traced the scar line on his cheek, pressing her hands to either side of his face – hers to touch and hold in ways her former self could only ever have dreamed of.

But fantasy had become reality for the Maid of Tarth - because she followed that tumultuous path, leading her to a life of love and acceptance.

Brienne smiled at her Jaime, breathing into him her scripture from the innermost reaches of her soul.

“I would.”

Chapter End Notes

I promised myself I would not cry....

My dearest readers and friends,

Here I type.

For two and a half months I have woven my sentences into this story yet now it is over I am lost for words.

I remember a heartsick shipper, stricken with grief and pain, embarking upon this journey to soothe her soul. Declaring that if one person took the time to read my imagination brought to the page, it would all be worthwhile.

I have been reduced to a puddle of tears and disbelief at the overwhelming support and beautiful comments I have received over the course of these 77 Chapters – my chosen number to finish this fic. Twice the sacred number of the Seven of Westeros sent to smile upon a new ending for Jaime and Brienne. But I digress...

You have all made this truly one of the most wonderful experiences of my life. It is difficult to convey the sincerity of my sentiment as I try to express how much it has meant to me. You have made me believe in myself, my writing and my ability to tell a story. Thus helping my own dreams of one day becoming an authoress to take flight.

To say it has meant the world would be the understatement of the century.

I will miss you all being part of my day and I don't know what I will do with my spare time!

I am going out on a limb to say that if anyone wants to stay in touch, email me! - angelenigma23@gmail.com (Yes, I am willing to risk spam, lol, you are worth it!)

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

For every kudos, comment and bookmark.

For taking the time to share this with me.

And for helping me fix the injustice that was done to Jaime and Brienne.

:) Hugs! NightReaderEnigma aka Madelyn
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!