The Harsh Light of Summer
by Natassia74

Summary

"Brienne is not my redemption. I have to earn that. And her, if she'll ever take me back."

Jaime survives, but living is much, much harder.

A redemptive, post-canon ending for Jaime and Brienne (and Arya).

Notes

Jaime/Brienne is by far the most significant romance, but Arya plays a significant role and Arya/Gendry is featured.

My medical knowledge is limited to that which advances the plot. Sorry to those who know better!
Unearthing

DAVOS

Kings Landing

Another war, another mad monarch, another sack of Kings Landing.

Only this mad monarch had a dragon to aid her in her rampage. And, nauseatingly, the help of Davos Seaworth.

The Onion Knight stood in the ruins of Kings Landing and watched the blood drain from the bodies of the newly-deceased Lannister soldiers. It dribbled from their necks, through the cracks and gullies of the ash-covered paving stones. Streams of Lannister red against Baratheon black. It might be poetic if it wasn't so fucked up and sick.

Davos still wasn’t entirely clear on how any of this had happened. How Westeros had gone from one king to five kings to no kings to two queens. How the Last War had escalated from an unlosable step on the road to victory to totally fucked in the space of a morning. Or how he, a woolly-headed, flea-bottom born, brown-stained low-life, had ended up being on the front lines of it all.

His hands were shaking and he felt weak and clammy. He recognised that he was in a state of shock. He'd experienced it before – when Stannis took his fingers, when he witnessed the death of his son on the Blackwater, when he had heard of the destruction of Stannis’ army, when he’d found Shireen’s burnt carving of the Baratheon stag, when he'd stared out from the battlements of Winterfell and faced the undead army. Still he'd seen so much death and destruction, it was a wonder it still affected him so.

And what purpose has it all served? He wondered. This? The obscene and senseless destruction, of men and lives and livelihoods. Of friendships too. He had entered the battlefield with Jon and Grey Worm, a triumvirate of colleagues and companions backed by the brilliance of dragonfire. Now, Grey Worm had threatened Jon, and Jon was battling with himself, and the north was on a collision course with Daenerys, and the whole world had turned a shade of dour grey.

Davos watched as Tyrion stumbled back past him, bleary eyed and covered in dust. The dwarf had stumbled into the ruins of the Red Keep some time before. Now, from the look on his face, it was obvious that he’d found the bad news he was looking for under there. His brother. And maybe the queen, the red queen, his sister. Tyrion was now on his way to his queen – the other queen, the dragon queen. His face ridden with anger and disgust. He was going to do something stupid, that much was clear. Davos couldn't stop him. Maybe I don’t even want to. Stupid appears to be the way of things today. Stupid may be needed to end it.

Resignedly, Davos retraced Tyrion's steps, through the burnt buildings and the rubble, past the piles of ashes. Bodies, they are bodies. Some were obviously the remains of dead children and desperate mothers, others fleeing soldiers, and dogs and horses too. Many more were unrecognisable. Did Shireen look like this – a pile of ash and bones? He shuddered, felt even sicker. He made his way into the tower, following, now determinedly sightlessly, in Tyrion's likely footsteps.

Although not a soldier, Davos had played a role in enough wars to know what would come next - the stripping and degradation of the bodies of the enemy dead, the triumph and the parade. Stannis
would have done it, called it a deterrent. And Stannis, prior to his madness, had been an honourable king. Davos had, but days ago, thought this queen to be above that kind of thing, but he was deluded no more. Despite her big eyes and soft hands, she was a conqueror, and a tyrant, like all the rest. Daenerys or Grey Worm or the Dorthraki would likely revel in a good parade of their enemies, a desecration of the dead. He was not about to allow that.

Davos made his way into the ruined base of the tower, and found the bodies easily enough, partially buried in a pile of rubble. Tragically, it appeared that they had stood in perhaps the worst spot possible, the rubble being nowhere near as bad only feet away. Almost as if he had wanted to die, thought Davos. Perhaps he did. Ser Jaime did look strangely peaceful, his face at rest, his arms wrapped protectively around his sister.

Davos had known Jaime Lannister for only a few weeks, and most of their time together had been that one night before the Battle for Winterfell. Prior to that, he’d heard tell of the Kingslayer, the Lannister lion, a man full of pride and arrogance yet devoid of honour and decency. A man so narcissistic, he’d fucked his own twin sister and foisted their bastard children upon the realm as kings. The cause of all this strife. But the man who had sat by the fire and shared stories with him barely resembled those stories. The Jaime Lannister he had met an intense, sad, troubled figure, more grey than gold, but honourable in his own way. Whatever his feelings for his sister, he’d been quietly but obviously in love with Ser Brienne, and they had seemed to find a strange peace in each other, even as they had softly bickered throughout the night. Lannister had fought beside him at Winterfell, and impressed with his bravery and his skill, despite using his awkward left hand. Whatever Ser Jaime’s flaws, his troubles, and his demons, Davos was determined that the man - Tyrion's brother, Ser Brienne's lover - did not deserve the public humiliation coming his way. The Dragon Queen was not going to be hang him up like some trussed turkey. She wasn't going to do it to the queen, either.

Davos surveyed the wreckage, wondering exactly what he could do. Burning the bodies was the most obvious answer. He had flint and tinder, but it was unlikely that he would be able to start a fire hot enough to do the job. Still, there were many smouldering and burning fires, and perhaps he could drag the bodies nearer them, set them alight. They only needed to be unrecognisable. Davos quickly worked to remove some of the additional rubble covering Jaime. He bent over and wrapped his hand around Ser jaime's left arm, then tentatively experimented with moving the knight's body.

Oddly, despite the winter chill, Jaime's hand was still warm. Davos froze, then moved his fingers over the Jaime’s wrist. There was a pulse. Low and thready, barely there, but a pulse.

Lannister is alive.

Injured, probably badly, but alive.

Davos scrambled over to the queen, his fingers feeling for a pulse. He found one in her throat, even weaker. Alive, too, albeit only just.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

He should report this to Jon. Or Tyrion. But a part of him rebelled at the idea. Jon had enough on his mind. And he would tell her. And then she would kill them both, either immediately, or worse, allow them to heal to kill and kill them publically. Stannis would have, too, he reminded himself, and again called it a deterrent. But Davos was as done with Stannis as he was with Daenerys. What would more death achieve? One more death. One more useless, fucking death? Enough is enough.
Tyrion, maybe, but he was gone. Gone to do something stupid. No, he was on his own for now.

**But what to do now?** He couldn’t carry them and he couldn’t ask for help. Then he remembered. *The Stark girl. She's had a horse- Strickland's horse.* She had dismounted it and tied it in the remains of the plaza. *Likely to go kill the Queen. The other Queen.* Fuck this was getting confusing. Maybe the horse was still there?

He made his way out of ruins of the keep, aware with every step that the Lannisters could be dying, that they may be dead by the time he got back. He pondered whether he really cared. Maybe not. If Jaime died, that would relieve him of the obligation to save him, and he’d just be back to disposing of the body. If the queen died ... well, good. But a part of Davos was determined to ensure that did not happen, if for no other reason than that Daenerys wanted them dead, and he was in no mood to give her anything she wanted.

He emerged from the ruins of the the keep to find the city near deserted, of soldiers and civilians alike. Winds rustled through the buildings, stirred little dust devils in the ashes. Davos made his way to where he remembered Arya leaving the horse. He could hear, distantly, the sound of chanting and stomping of the unsullied, the cries of the Dorthraki and the stomping of their horses. Where had they all come from? He had thought she had dedicated all her forces to Winterfell, and that is certainly what she had told them, but that could not have been the case. *Had she kept them in reserve? Where these the men holding Casterly Rock? Did Tyrion know?* He couldn't think about that now. That way lay madness. He heard the sound of dragon wings, and he looked up to see Drogon circling overhead. The white horse, tied to a pole, neighed and squealed, panicking at the sight of the massive reptilian creature overhead. Drogon swooped low, and Davos was, for a moment, terrified that the dragon was coming for him, or the horse. But it landed elsewhere, higher on the tower. The queen was on its back.

Possessed of a sudden and overwhelming need to get the hell out of there, Davos grabbed the horse's reins, untied them roughly, and pulled the beast along. "C'mon boy, quickly," he whispered to the animal. "Let's go, mate. Got you a better option than being dragon food." The poor creature whinnied and shook, but seemed relieved to have a firm hand guiding it. *A fine creature,* he thought absently. *Probably worth a pretty penny.* He led the horse through the ruins, talking gently and calmly. In the distance, the Dragon Army cheered.

"What are you doing?"

Davis jumped at the sound of the voice, and turned to see a small girl. *Arya.* She emerged from the shadows, still covered in dust and blood, nearly a ghost.

"Saving a life. Maybe two. A fresh start for the afternoon." He replied, barely giving her a glance. "Get yerself outta here, Arya. What I'm doing is like to get me killed."

Arya watched him, head on the side, but made no move to go.

"Cersei is back there, and Jaime," she said.

"Aye. They look dead, but there’s life in them, just."

"You're getting them out?"

He nodded, gave her warning look. *Don’t get involved.*

Then, to his surprise, she said: "I'll help."

Davos eyed her suspiciously. Everything he had heard about Arya suggested that saving people,
particularly Lannisters, was not her usual course. But then he shrugged. She’d killed the Night
King and, rumour had it, nearly every Frey. No doubt she could kill him if she wanted. He
couldn’t stop her, and probably couldn’t do this by himself anyway.

Together, they led the horse down the stairs, and through what was left of the caverns beneath the
keep. They couldn’t get the naimal all the way down, but they got him near, and tied him up. He
was happier to be away from the dragon-infested open skies, even if the smouldering ruins were
not a great improvement. Davos and Arya went back to the Lannisters, and carefully finished
removing them from the rubble.

It wasn’t half as bad as it looked, mainly bricks, tiles and plaster, no rocks, little heavy debris.
Both of them were unconscious and injured, although perhaps not as badly as they could have been. Bruises, contusions, breaks.

“Crush injuries,” Arya said darkly. She drew a dagger and sliced through Jaime’s breeches. She
pointed at the bruises on his legs. “We need to open the contusions, relieve the pressure. Do you
have bandages?”

Davos shook his head, but ripped a strip off his tunic. “Jaime first” he said. Arya nodded. Neither
of them were particularly concerned about the queen.

Jaime’s legs were swollen and bruised, the muscles nearly mulched in places. Davos watched in
shock as Arya took the blade and expertly cut the muscle open.

"Why are you doin' this?” he asked. He poured wine over the wounds, and Jaime twitched.

“Relieving the pressure. It can help save the legs, stops the rotten blood spreading…”

“No, this. All of it. Why are you helping me with this? Don’t you hate the Lannisters? Is Cersei
on that infamous list?”

Arya shrugged. "I don’t hate Jaime. I did come here to kill Cersei, but maybe I had the wrong
queen.”

Davos snorted. "She's as much a cause of this as the other one.”

"Then why are you doing this?” She asked.

Davos looked up at Arya and met her eyes. "Because I’ve had enough death. Because this is
Tyrion's brother. Because I fought beside him at Winterfell. Because of lady Brienne. And
because I don’t want that one” he pointed to wear to the keep above them, from where Daenerys
was undoubtedly addressing her troops, “to win on all fronts.”

Arya nodded. "I'll go with those reasons, too. Also, I've had an epiphany.”

Davos raised a questioning eyebrow, and then grimaced as he tied off the make-shift bandage.
They were filthy, and he wasn’t convinced pouring wine over them would stop them going bad, but
there were few other options.

Once Jaime’s legs were looked at, Davos and Arya turned to the rest of him. The kingslayer was
dressed in damaged padded brigantine armour and a leather coat. Both were padded, and probably
the only reason he was still alive, and in so much better condition than his sister.

"Someone might recognise this. Take it off, we'll dispose of it somewhere,” Davos said.
They sliced it off – if was expensive, and too obvious to leave on anyway.

Without the brigantine, Jaime looked smaller and leaner than Davos had expected, almost malnourished. He had wounds down his torso, two deep gushes mere inches from his kidneys, bruises and contusions, likely broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder. As they peeled off the tight leather, the blood begun to flow from the open wounds. Arya swore, and held the gashes together with her hands as Davos tore strips off Cersei’s dress, this time, and wrapped them around his ribs and stomach.

“Won't hold for long, gonna need stitching,” he observed.

“I can do that, but not here.” Arya looked him over. “We need to do something about the hand. The lack of if says ‘I’m the kingslayer in disguise.’”

Davos pulled off his glove, stuffed a cloth into it. “This will pass as a hand, assuming no one looks too closely.” He checked Ser Jaime's pulse again. It was still weak, his health probably now compromised by additional blood loss, but he was still alive.

They then turned their attention, less carefully, to Cersei. The former queen looked worse for wear, having a nasty head wound. Blood leaked over the bodice of her dress. She was, obviously, not at her best, but even allowing for that, Davos struggled to see in her the famed beauty and poise. She was a middle aged woman, her face drawn and swollen, her expression, even in sleep, hard and mean. What, we wondered, had inspired such loyalty from her brother.

He watched Arya as she stood for a moment, staring at her former nemesis, twisting the knife in her hand. The temptation on her face was obvious.

“If you’re goin’ to do it, do it now, for I waste the time bandaging her up,” He said. He supposed he didn’t really care. If anything, it would save him some time.

Arya audibly ground her teeth, then used the knife not to kill her, but to make the terrifying cuts in one of her arms and her legs.

“She’s lucky I’ve had an epiphany.”

Davos pulled the former queen’s dress off her, leaving her in a linen shift. He ripped a couple of strips of fabric from the dress and then wrapped them into a make-shift shawl around her head. It wouldn't survive close scrutiny, but it wasn't too bad.

"You're good at this." Arya observed.

'I'm a smuggler, girl, and I can smuggle anythin' in and out of Kings Landing. Next steps the trick, though.” He caught her gaze. “I don't need your help, but I would appreciate it.”

She nodded. “I said I'd help”.

"Good.” Davos stood up and held his hand out to Arya. He pulled her up, and put his hands on her shoulders, squeezed them. "Thank you. Now, focus your mind on this. You're a merchant daughter, a refugee. Your house collapsed. You’re getting your parents out of here. Your injured parents. You understand?”

Arya nodded. This she could do. They concocted the story further as they worked

With Arya's help, Davos carried Jaime and lifted him onto the horse. The knight emitted a slight moan at being moved, a good sign all things considered. His breath was so slight, he may as well
"I'm gonna strap him on, then put 'er across his lap", Davos explained. "It'll look like he pulled her up, then lost consciousness. Anyone who looks at your mum will think she's dead, and you're delusional. No one will want to confront you much about it. Easier than just bringing Jaime, if you're lookin' for a reason to save 'er as well. Look shocked and like your gonna cry and they'll stay away."

Arya nodded. "I can do that. What am I going to do with them?"

"You're going to take them to Rosby, little town to the East. Follow the road that way. I know a maester there who'll do anything for money. But you don't need to get 'em the whole way, just head up the road. I'll catch you up."

Arya took the horse's reins. "And what are you going to do?"

Davos raised an eyebrow. "Make sure our sins will never be discovered. And laying some groundwork for what's to come. I'll meet you on the road."
What am I doing?

Arya pondered this as she led the white horse out of the tower and through the devastated city, the two nearly-dead Lannister siblings draped across its back.

Saving Cersei was not what she expected to be doing today. But then, very little of this day had gone as expected.

Except, of course, for Sandor.

The Hound's death, sadly, had not surprised her. She had known, even as they left Winterfell together, that they were riding toward his likely end. As much as she cared for him, she had never thought to interfere with that journey. Hell, if she was honest with herself, she'd spent most of the ride actually admiring his conviction, and possibly even assuming she would join him in some glorious, murderous conclusion. It had all seemed so simple, so inevitable.

And then he had gone and done something totally unexpected too. He had told her to leave.

"Do you want to be like me girl?" He had asked her, amid the fire and destruction of the keep.

Yes, had been her first thought. Yes, I want to be like you, the embodiment of unrelenting vengeance.

But then, no, had been her second thought. An unbidden, unexpected realisation that formed only as she looked into the Hound's deadly but oddly caring eyes. No, I don't want to be like you. At least, not entirely. I want your bravery and humour, your I-don't-give-a-fuck attitude. But I don't want to be so consumed by rage and vengeance that I let the rest of my life fall away, as you have.

I don't want to share your fate. Not today.

Arya was not afraid of death. She had looked it in the eye, dealt it out, been it. But as she stood in that crumbling tower, the dragon decimating the city around her, she had realised that while she embraced death, she was terrified of life. She hadn't lived since she was twelve years old, when she died watching her father on that scaffold. From that day on, she had merely existed, walking through a parody of living, moving forward only to avenge her family.

Sandor had, in those moments, and in his own gruff way, forced her realise that her family would never have wanted that. Her father did not die so that she could too. He died so she could live. She owed it to him, and to her mother, to Robb, even to Rickon, to chose life over death. And to get the hell out of that collapsing tower.

Sandor died for me, as much as for his vengeance, she had realised, as she fled for her life. I owe it to him too. To live, the best life I can.

That was her epiphany.
Walking beside the horse now, she felt a little less sanguine, a little more cynical, but even if the optimism of her epiphany did wear off, she had to move past vengeance. Her list was finished. All but Cersei, and Cersei’s life was now in her hands. She’d won.

So, Sandor, I'm being about as different to you as I can be. I'm saving the bitch. I hope you’re happy.

Much to Arya's surprise, getting out of King Landing with the kingslayer and the disposed queen in tow was surprisingly easy. Davos was right that no one wanted to confront her. Tears and misery were a potent weapon - she'd have to remember that. There were no real guards or soldiers anyway. The Lannister troops were dead, or soon to be, and Dany’s people were elsewhere, yelling and cheering, and doing whatever weird shit they now did. She thought, maybe, she could hear them chanting. Were they actually worshiping her now? Arya would not have been surprised if they were. But whatever was happening, she didn't want anything to do with it.

Her mind went briefly to Jon. She'd promised to meet him at the gates, but he wasn't there and she wasn't waiting. No doubt he had other problems, much bigger ones than her.

Arya led the horse and her ‘parents’ out of what was left of the gates, which really wasn't much. They weren't needed anyway, given parts of the wall had collapsed. Outside, on what had been the battlefield, the dead were piled to her waist - burned, slashed, beheaded, trampled. Some, mainly Golden Company mercenaries, had been finished off with a sword to the back while crawling away. Flies buzzed and the mud was black and sticky with innards and blood. It looked even worse than Winterfell did after the Long Night, and she was darkly glad she did not have to help with this cleanup. She noticed a few brave, desperate or greedy souls scavenging among the bodies on the edge of the field, their eyes flicking between her, the gate, and the deceased they were robbing, ready to flee at the sight of authority. Somewhere behind her, high in the tower, Drogon roared. I have to get out of here, she thought. She pressed on determinedly.

Once past the remnants of the battlefield, she found the refugees. Injured and shocked civilians, sitting lost and despairing, along the road. Several stared at her with blank eyes as she passed.

Arya wondered, briefly, why she was saving the Lannisters, and not two of these innocents. She had no answer, other than perhaps a simmering desire to not let Daenerys completely win - Davos’ motivation, but it was good enough until she had time to fully examine her own.

And who is an innocent anyway? She wondered, aimlessly, as she tried not to look at the people around her. Who of these are thieves or whore mongers or rapers? Why did that man survive and not another? Why that boy and his father, and not the mother and child who died in front of me in the inferno?

There was no answer.

You can't save everyone. Someone had said that to her once, and this morning proved it true. You can only save who you can, and hope it makes a difference. This just may.

I'm also saving Jaime for Brienne, Arya thought passingly, desperately trying to salve her soul. For some reason, Brienne loved Jaime. And Sansa loved Brienne, and Arya loved Sansa. It was a circle of affection of which the kingslayer was the perhaps undeserving beneficiary. Although for all she knew, Brienne wanted Jaime dead now. After all, he was here, wasn’t he, in Kings Landing, when he had promised to be up there, in Winterfell, with her? What the fuck was that about, anyway?

Arya made her way through the make-shift refugee camp, and onto the road to the east. The were travelers on it, but not as many as she had expected. Nothing like the streams of people coming
and going before the battle.

*How many had died?*

*Too many* was the only answer.

Well, dwelling on it was not going to help anyone. She pushed the guilt aside, storing it away with her fear, and her cruel streak of self-satisfaction that made her want to say “I told you so” to Jon. With a sigh, she took her horse's reigns, and continued east, leaving the smouldering remains of Kings Landing behind her.

She did not look back.

Davos met her, as promised, further down the road. He had gold, two more horses, and saddlebags stuffed with necessities. When they reached Rosby, they went straight to the ramshackle, wattle and daub building that apparently passed for an inn. Rooms were in short supply, but so was gold, and the Onion Knight’s ready supply of the latter ensured privacy and discretion, so far as it could.

Davos also purchased the services of a Maester Rivers. He was an unattractive, weasel-faced man with grasping fingers and a lisp. He looked, to Arya, suspiciously like a Frey, but Davos assured her that his reputation for discretion and competence were too important to his livelihood to be compromised, unsubtly dropping that his patients included many daughters of great houses who had carelessly opened their legs for the wrong man.

"If he's that good, shouldn't he be at Kings Landing, helping?" Arya asked.

"No one there can pay him, and he's not one for danger," Davos answered, the contempt dripping from his tongue.

Yet, whatever his personal qualities, Rivers was a competent healer. Once fed his piece of gold, he went to work cleaning and sewing wounds, setting bones, applying salves and unguents, and dripping water into mouths.

"Will they live?" Arya asked, when he was finally done.

Rivers shrugged.

"Him? Better than even odds. Crush injuries of your father’s kind are dangerous. Even if there is no obvious wound, the body can sicken and die, and he had many obvious wounds in addition to those we can't see. Damage to the bone of his leg, rotting of the muscle, dehydration, but he is a strong one. You did well to cut the limbs and release the pressure, that may save him. But your mother?" He gestured to Cersei. "Her chances are not so good. Her blood is poisoned and her head is damaged. Harder to recover from those, I’m afraid."

His tone was matter of fact. There was no empathy, but no cruelty either.

"Tell me," he asked. "How does a merchant's daughter like you know how to treat wounds?"

His tone was casual, but there was an air of something more - genuine interest, perhaps, or suspicion. Arya bristled, but lying came easily to her. "Father does not believe in being idle, ser. I worked accounts for a barber. I watched him cut the wounds of labourers crushed by scaffolding and the like."

It was a lie, but cloaked in truth, and Rivers seemed satisfied. She’d watched many such operations with the faceless men.
“Well, you did good work, girl. It is something of a shame I cannot train you as a maester, although if you are interested in learning the arts of midwifery and potions?”

Arya shook her head.

Rivers frowned. “Well, you’ll be here a while. Think on it. In the meantime, all we can do is wait and see. Your mother is struggling. Her blood was already poisoned. We’ll know in a day or so.”

After cleaning up, Arya went looking for Ser Davos, and found him writing letters and making arrangements in the common room. He was squinting at the scrolls, deep lines in his forward. Reading and writing was clearly a difficult task for him, but he did not lack for dedication.

"Rivers has ravens, although they cost a pretty penny”, he explained. "I'm trying to organise a council to decide what to do about, well, every fucking thing."

There was to be a trial, he explained, of Jon and Tyrion, and the great houses would all be represented at it. Sansa would need to be there, which meant also Brienne. dDorne, Highgarden. Storm’s End.

Gendry.

She tried not to feel excited about that.

They discussed telling someone that Jaime and Cersei lived, but knew it would only make things worse for Tyrion were that known. Davos was uncomfortable with the secrecy, but Arya had shaken her head at the idea of disclosing it even to Brienne.

"Lady Brienne is unable to lie, and Sansa is unable to keep a secret. We can tell neither,” she said.

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**BRIENNE**

**Winterfell**

Even weeks later, Brienne can still recall nearly every detail of the day Jaime left.

She can remember drifting awake as the first rays of light fell through the small window in her chambers. She can remember Jaime’s arms gliding around her waist, his breath warm on her neck, and his cock hot against her back. He had traced a hand down, over the flat of her stomach, through her curls, between her legs, groaning happily to find her wet and willing. “Shall we?” he had whispered to her, in a low, gravelly voice that made her spine tingle. In answer, she had rolled over toward him, opened her legs, and let him sink into her. They had made love - surely that is what it was - gently, languidly, holding each other and stroking and kissing as the sun rose. Finally, when the room was bathed in light, she had arched and moaned his name and come, her peak a long, slow wave that started in her stomach and stretched out to her fingers and toes. Jaime had helped her ride it, then groaned and pulled out, and she had finished him with her hand until he emptied himself on the sheets, all the while panting and kissing her neck and whispering how good they were together.

Later, she had hurriedly dressed while he had lain sprawled bonelessly on the bed, naked and satisfied, watching her. The sight of him, in her bed like *that* had been so gratifying that she had gamely bent over him and given his flaccid cock a little kiss. He had started to harden immediately, had grabbed her, and started tickling her, and if she hadn’t been late already, they
could have gone again. She had promised him they would, that night, as she left.

But they didn’t.

The rest of that day had been much less pleasant. The raven message, Sansa’s cold cruelty as she surmised its contents, the look of confusion and pain on Jaime's face as he comprehended the impending death of his sister. Brienne had returned to her chambers that night to find them, unusually, empty. With a sad and sinking feeling in her stomach, she'd undressed, climbed into the bed, and waited. It was the first time she had slept naked without him, and she had meant it as an invitation - if he had need of her body, he was permitted to take it. She had wanted him too, desperately.

But he hadn’t had need of it, or hadn’t wanted it. Instead he had left, to return to his sister.

She can’t remember him coming into her chambers that night, only the sound of him leaving. But he did come, and she clings to the knowledge that his intended silent goodbye must have meant that the decision was not been an easy one for him. She almost wishes she hadn't heard him, hadn't followed him to the courtyard, hadn't heard the confusing words that followed. She sincerely wishes that their last moments together had not been him fleeing, and she sobbing.

Brienne can recall, painfully, how she had watched him canter away, her eyes fixed on his palfrey until was it consumed by the darkness. How she had then stood there, tears freezing on her face, watching the empty gate until she could no longer hear the pounding hooves, and then how she had stared into dark, silent night until her fingers were numb and her legs could no longer hold her. Only then did she retreat to her chambers. There, she had sat on her bed, on linen that still smelt of them, that was still stained with his seed, and watched the fire dwindle to embers. She had hoped the cold would freeze her heart as well as her toes. It didn't.

Brienne had been trained since birth to deal with her emotions rationally, and preferably invisibly. And so, in the aftermath of Jaime’s leaving, that is what she tried to do.

Jaime had, she dutifully rationalised, offered her nothing but his physical self, and she had taken that willingly. He had made no promises, offered no commitments, never told her he loved her. If she never asked any questions, never sought any explanations, or had any expectations, why did she have any right to be upset when he offered none in return?

Because he did promise more, if not with words, then with hands and eyes and body, her traitorous mind answered for her. Because he had loved me, as I did him.

And she had loved him. She had loved him for years. Since the bear pit at Harrenhal, and maybe before. Perhaps since the baths, when he’d bared his soul, shown to her alone his secret pain and pride and honour, and told her that he trusted her with it. No one, not even Renly, had ever treated her with such respect.

Sitting on that bed in her chambers, that night he left, Brienne had briefly entertained the possibility that she her love was, again, unrequited, and that she was so inexperienced, so idealistic, so hopeful, that she had deluded herself that Jaime loved her by seeing only what she wanted. It was easy to fall into that trap of self loathing. But the calmer part of herself, that confident part Jaime’s trust in her had fostered, knew it wasn't true. She had seen love in the way touched her, held her and kissed her, and even more so in the way he threw himself into battle against the wights to protect her. In their private moments, he had been so gentle and tender, so honest and open, it was inconceivable to her that he would allow himself to be so vulnerable for anything but love.
That Jaime had loved her, in his own way, she didn't doubt.

But, for reasons she did not, could not, at that time, understand, love was not enough.

And so, she’d allowed herself that one night to cry, and mourn, and imagine how things could have been. And then she put her feelings away, and went back to work.

Fortunately, there was plenty to be done. Winterfell had been devastated, and needed a lot of rebuilding. The remaining troops, mainly green boys and a few eager girls, needed training. Sansa had an endless list of tasks, and too few people to do them. Brienne was needed, and respected, and even liked, and most days, that was enough.

Still, in the days and weeks that followed, she hadn’t been able to stop herself picking apart every word Jaime had said to her in the courtyard. She’d examined them, ruminated over them, and still she could not understand them. They were hateful words, but they had been directed at himself, and at Cersei, not at her. She remembered his sad, desperate eyes, how he had almost been in tears as he spoke them, how he had stroked her hand so tenderly even as he removed it from his face.

Her heart ached for him, even as her mind struggled to comprehend why he would choose to go back to a woman who had, mere weeks before, sent an assassin to kill him. Eventually, lacking any other explanation, she rationalized the only way she could. She knew he had struggled to find a place at Winterfell, that he was tortured by his past, and reminded of it everyday when he looked at Bran. He had, in the end, not believed himself worthy of anyone but Cersei, of a new life without her. He had seen himself an oathbreaker, a man without honour, and he’d chosen to do the only thing he felt he could, even if that was something as foolishly self destructive as fulfilling a vow that no longer mattered, to someone who didn’t deserve it, in circumstances where he would most surely die.

You couldn’t stop him, you couldn’t save him, it's not your fault, she told herself. But she did not know whether she truly believed that. He chose death with his sister over life with me. Any way she tried to rationalise that, it still hurt.

But she came to terms with what happened, and once she did, she put aside any hope that Jaime would return to her, although she continued to cling to a small slither of hope that he would at least live, even if it was with someone else. With Cersei.

Every day, she dreaded the arrival of a raven, with news that may say otherwise.

The first raven arrived a fortnight after he left. It told only of the destruction of King's Landing and the Dragon Queen's descent into madness. The second, a few days later, reported that both queens were dead, that Tyrion and Jon had been arrested, that there was to be a trial. Neither said anything of Jaime.

The third, a week later, was from Tyrion to Sansa, and of a more personal nature. It was both illuminating and devastating. Tyrion was imprisoned, facing trial for treason for releasing his brother. He didn't deny the allegation, wrote that his only regret was that it had all been for naught. He had personally found Jaime and Cersei's bodies under the rubble. They had been embracing.

"They left the world as they came into it, together. While I cannot say Jaime died happily, I find comfort in the knowledge that he both fulfilled his vows, and that he finally experienced happiness in the weeks before he passed."

Sansa showed Brienne that part of the the letter, as she supposed Tyrion had intended. Her lady sneered at the words, called Tyrion selfish and thoughtless, and Jaime much worse, but Brienne did not share in her anger. Mainly, she just felt sad, for herself as well as for Jaime. He was happy, and
I was too. She thanked Sansa for showing her, ignored the brewing agony in her stomach, the sting behind her eyes, and focused on the practical issue of what to do about Tyrion.

Then, when her duties were finished, she returned to her chambers, and allowed herself another night of tears. Two, she told herself. Only two.

She could forgive herself that.

But then came the third.

A few days later, her courses started.

As she stared at the blood on her small clothes, she assured herself that she was nothing but relieved. Relieved and lucky. She had dallied with a man for a month, and escaped with no real consequences, no public shame or humiliation, no bastard child filling her belly. A child, she told herself, would have dishonored her knighting, ruined her reputation, encouraged the gossip that Jaime had only honoured her to get between her legs.

And yet, the pain that burst from her chest at the realisation of what that blood meant was overwhelming. The possibility of the last and only thing Jaime could have left for her was gone.

She struggled through the day, moving like one of the mindless undead they had fought together. Then she went to her chambers and cried.

Three times, she thought. Three times I have cried, and that is enough.

She had loved Jaime, she still loved him, she would always love him. But love was the death of duty, and it was duty for which she was made.

Jaime had, in any case, not left her with nothing. She had memories to last a lifetime, experiences she would never have known otherwise. And she had his gifts. She would honour him by wearing the armour he made her, by carrying his sword, by knighting Pod, and by being every bit the knight he charged her to be. It was enough.

The next morning she washed the streaks from her face, proudly donned the armour and sword, plastered on her neutral visage, called Pod to her side, and got back to work. There was much to be done before they left for Kings Landing.
This was a difficult chapter to write. I am still not happy with it, but it is only one step in the journey, so I will get it out and move on to the next.

Jaime

An Inn - Rosby

Jaime drifted between sleeping and dying, surfacing only for brief moments of lucidity. Awake, he was wracked by pain, his leg a searing mass of agony, his ribs a band of fire, and his head a battlefield of emotions - fear and love and shame fought for dominance and tore his mind to tatters. Sleeping brought little relief, as here too he was ravaged by memories, dreams and nightmares, until he longed to for the Stranger to take him into the cold and silent black.

He's standing on the tourney field at Casterly Rock, the sound of seabirds overhead, a sword in his hand and the wind in his hair.

He's in Harrenhal, on his knees and being knighted. “I charge you to protect the innocent.” His golden hand falls to the ground before him.

He's dancing with Cersei, her red gown flying. He's dancing with this sword, the blade whirling, parrying. His sword master is laughing. He looks up, and Cersei is watching him from a balcony, her eyes hot with jealousy and longing.

He's in his sister's rooms, in her and under her. "Quickly Jaime, quickly" she is whispering in his ear, her golden hair falling like water around them.

He's with his brothers of the kingsguard, Dayne and Darry and the others. “ We swore to protect her too" he says, as a woman's cries fill the air. "But not from him," says Darry.

Brienne stands in the Winterfell courtyard, crying. Or is it Harrenhal again? Oathkeeper is covered in blood and more is pooled on the ground beneath her legs. “Stay with me. Please. Stay.” She cries.

"Stay with him" commands Rhaegar. Jaime's watching the prince ride away to battle on the Trident, while Aerys laughs behind him. "We'll talk when I return...we'll talk...we'll talk...we'll talk". But Rhaegar lies dead, his eyes are being eaten by crows and his mouth is filled with dried, black blood.

Rhaegar's children are dead before the throne, their tiny battered bodies laid out like sacrifices. "You promised to protect them." It's Rhaeger who says the words, then Elia, then Cersei. Then it's his children, Tommen and Myrcella, smashed and bloodied before the throne. Joff sits above them on the throne, laughing, but purple.

"You are no no son of mine," says Tywin, from somewhere in the dark.
Tyrion holds a crossbow, and laughs. Except that now it's Bronn, laughing, and Tyrion is dead. "Ladies, meet Ser Bronn of the Blackwater". They're in the water, together. The sky is fire above. You saved my life, and now you're sent to kill me.

He's back at Casterly Rock, but it's a ruin. The bedroom where he first made love to Cersei is covered in mold. He turns and wanders the battlements. Lannisport is on fire.

"Burn them all!" screams a voice. He's in a room, and it's black. He draws his sword and turns, plunges into a fleeing back. But it's not Aerys screaming, it's Daenerys. And then it's Cersei.

She looks at him, blood trailing down her ribs. She's holding a candle. She's standing in wildfire. "Quickly Jaime," she cries. "Do me quickly." She drops the candle. A wall of flame falls down around her, like her golden hair.

The Red Keep explodes around him.

Jaime woke with a start, his mouth open in a silent scream. His throat was so dry and damaged no sound came out. He struggled to pull himself out of the cloaking darkness but his limbs were not cooperating.

"Water…" He croaked.

"He's awake, get the maester..." A northern voice. A girl, familiar but he couldn't place it.

The nausea rose from his gut to his mouth and he retched. Even the darkness seemed to swirl. I'm meant to be dead, he thought quizzically. Didn't the tower fall?

Then he feels like he is falling, back into the comforting blackness, and sleep claims him again.

He's fucking Cersei in the tower. He's young and whole, with two hands and she's slender and beautiful and coming.

There's a raven in the window, watching them, its red eye burning into him. It opens its mouth to condemn them, but makes no sound.

He's alone, with the crow, as it leaves. He follows it to the window and watches it fly. It's a flock now, a dark shape on the horizon, a storm.

He’s falling from the tower. Arms flailing madly, but he's still got two hands.

He’s on the ground, legs crushed. Cersei watches him from her tower, looks at his weakness, turns away in disgust. Stay with me! Please!

Cold water rushes over him. He’s in a river. He’s drowning. The water at his feet is red and black, and that at his head is clear.

......

He was halfway to waking, bleary and confused, as the maester tended his wounds. "He's out of danger," he heard the man say, as if from a great distance. Was talking about him? Milk of the poppy, he realised. Someone had given him a good dosing. This is not a bad way to be. The pain
was there, he could feel it, and yet he didn’t care. Blissful really. Particularly as it made it so difficult to think.

Time passed. Jaime was vaguely aware of the maester leaving, more time passing. He’d always avoided poppy before. He had once stubbornly endured the agony of having Qyburn cut the dead skin off his arm without any. He’d fainted anyway. Gods I was stupid back then.

But I’m stupid now, too. So bloody stupid. His thoughts turned, unbidden, to Winterfell, and to Brienne. He pictured her, lying in her - their - bed on that last night, her long back, the expanse of creamy skin disappearing under the furs, the way her eyelids fluttered as she slept. She was naked, waiting for me, he recalled. With the poppy still strumming through his veins, numbing his senses, he found it was enjoyable to torture himself with the ‘maybes’. His traitorous memory knew what had actually came next, but in his stupor he could change it and forget. He could undress, climb into bed beside her, take her in his arms and crawl between her legs and put himself inside her.

He lost himself in his waking dream, until the mists began to dissipate from his mind and the pain started gnawing at its edges. The pain brought reality, and memory, with it.

He’d left her in that bed, and gone to King’s Landing to die with his sister.

The pain was now a constant burn.

Hope for pain, welcome it, Tywin had told him before his first battle. Pain means you’re alive.

But what if I don’t want to be alive? He wondered. His leg felt like a direwolf was gnawing at it. Surely I need not welcome it then?

Slowly he found he could focus on the grey and grizzled image of Ser Davos Seaworth, standing in the door to the room. The Onion Knight was not a person he would have expected to find by his bedside upon waking from unconsciousness, but given how his life was unfolding he wouldn’t have been surprised to find the bloody Maiden tending him.

"Am I dead?" he asked.

The knight looked up, only mildly surprised. "Not yet. But you’re in a right mess, Lannister."

Davos walked over to a small table, poured a mug of water and then approached Jaime to hand it to him. He tried to take it, instinctively raising his right hand, before catching himself. He tried again with the left, but it shook and missed. Davos placed the mug beside him without comment, and after a moment Jaime managed pick it up.

Yes, a right mess.

The water tasted odd, dirty. River water, not from a well, muddy and brown. Still he drunk it, tried to focus on clearing his mind of the drug-induced haze. He coughed, struggled to keep the it down.

"You’ve been in and out of waking for days," Davos said.

Jaime frowned, and tried to put the fractured parts of his brain back together, searching for a logical reason why he would be in an inn with Davos. The last thing he could remember, he had been in the tunnels beneath the keep. The passage was blocked, the ceiling fell. He had been with Cersei. She was crying. Then one thought formed in his mind, excluding all others.

"Cersei? Where’s Cersei?"
Davos sighed. "She's alive, just," he offered grudgingly.

Jaime felt oddly numb. He’d succeeded, he supposed, although it didn’t feel like victory. *I thought I would die in her arms.*

And then he remembered. "And her child?"

At that Davos frowned, and somewhere in the room someone else snorted. A girl? He couldn't see her.

"I’m sorry, I don’t know. I didn't know she was with child," Davos stammered, looking stricken and surprised.

It took a moment for jaime's tortured mind to comprehend that. *She was not been showing, they may not know,* he thought first. But, much like the gnawing pain, the truth begun creeping into his mind. *She wasn't showing. Months and months and she wasn't showing.* He was too tired and sick to identify precisely how he felt. *Anguish? Relief? Anger?*

Had she just lost the baby, or never been pregnant?

*It doesn't matter,* he told himself. *It never mattered.*

But it did. Not just the fact she wasn't pregnant, but the fact of the lie. Another betrayal of his trust. But he had betrayed another's trust too, he reminded himself, so who was he to judge?

*Stay with me. Please.* The words echoed through his mind.

"Where is she?" he asked.

Jaime wasn’t sure who he was asking about, Cersei or Brienne. But Davos guessed the latter. He indicated to his right, and Jaime painfully turned his head to see a cot pushed against the other wall. It bore a small form, huddled under furs, the top of a tarnished, faded gold head.

"She's worse than you."

Worse than me. He pondered that. *Is she really?* Worse? Hadn't he failed to protect her? *Nothing's more hateful than failing to protect the one you love.* Brienne thought that, but Brienne was never hateful, even when she failed. Cersei was, and so was he, so what did one more failure matter?

*Brienne was crying when I left.*

The familiar smothering black blanket of self-loathing and despair that had cloaked his existence for years begun to unfurl itself over him again. It hurt to think. It hurt to feel. It just fucking hurt to be alive. He let the comforting blackness engulf him, and fell into its embrace.

... 

*He's on the walls of Winterfell, skeletal hands clawing at his legs. His blood, Lannister crimson, paints the ground red.*

*A dragon roars overhead. He looks up, and the black night explodes into a sky of fire.*

*He's fighting again, back against the wall. Brienne is beside him, her sword liquid silver. She grunts as she fights.*
They move in unison, fighting, the hoard, the dead falling around them.

They move in unison, fucking, her hands on his chest, his cock deep inside her. She grunts as she fucks.

They’re fucking on the walls of Winterfall, the stones cracking beneath them.

The walls crumble to dust as he thrusts.

He roars as he comes.

...

Jaime awoke in the dark with a gasp.

He struggled to sit up, but his limbs were still weak. The effort exhausted him. *Disgraceful.* He collapsed back against the scratchy sheets, and tried to get a measure of the room. It was in an inn or merchants house of some kind, rustic and not particularly clean.

His mouth was dry, so dry. He needed water. There was a jug on a nearby table. Maybe he could reach it. He leaned over, and his body screamed. His stump groped uselessly, the mug just out of reach. He leaned over further and fell out of the bed with a crash and a groan.

He heard footsteps, and two sets of feet appeared in the doorway. One big pair, one small, both in dusty, worn boots. The toes seemed to watch him for a moment, as presumably did the toes' owners. He wondered who they were, but raising his head seemed like too much of a chore.

"Bloody idiot" said a voice. *The northern girl.* He felt strong arms lift him and guide him toward the bed. Davos, he assumed. He collapsed back onto it with relief.

When the world stopped spinning, he focused on his rescuers. Davos, yes, and of all people, Arya Stark. *How the...?* He tried to think again. The collapsing keep, the dust, the sudden weight of bricks and tiles collapsing on him and then...nothing.

He should be dead. He had known - *known* - when he left Winterfell that there was no afterwards for him. Bran had told him so. He’d had his lengthy ride south to come to peace with that. By the time the tower fell, with Cersei sobbing in his arms, and the city crumbling around him, he’d welcomed it. Yet here he was. Still alive. Apparently he’d fucked up his dearth. Why not? He’d fucked up everything else in his life.

"We were buried, under the keep," he croaked.

"Quite literally," Arya said. "You chose about the worst place to stand and got buried. We dug you out."

Davos approached him, and held out a cup of water. He felt a sense of *déjà vu.* Jaime took the water and drank gratefully. It stayed down this time.

"Why?"

Arya pushed herself off the wall she was leaning against and raised an eyebrow. "Spite?" she suggested.

Jaime almost laughed, but that would have been most unwise given the parlous state of his ribs. "Toward me, or someone else?"
"Everyone? All three of you?" She suggested.

Jaime blinked uncomprehendingly. She was a hard, strange little thing, Arya. He'd never so much as had a conversation with her, yet here she was at his bedside, looking disdainfully bored at having saved his life. *Maybe I am still dreaming.*

Davos shuffled beside him. "Things went to shit at Kings Landing, such that you takin' off and rescuing your sister was one of the less fucked up things that happened."

Jaime tried to focus his mind, put the competing images and memories in some kind of order. "Daenerys burnt the city..." he surmised.

"Aye. Thousands died."

Yes, he can remember. The cries. The explosions. The keep collapsing. *Yet all that had mattered in those moments was Cersei. And ending my own pain.*

Guilt burned in his stomach. The water suddenly made him feel sick.

He glanced at Arya. "And you saved us?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" she shrugged. "But I *could* save you. I failed many others." She looked haunted at that. "And I think, of everyone there, you and Cersei surviving would annoy her the most. Also, I know you. Despite you being a Lannister, I didn't hate you, at least not before you went and shat all over Brienne."

*Brienne.* The image came, again of Brienne sobbing in the dark. *Stay with me. Please.* The burning guilt in his stomach erupted into nausea inducing inferno. It was almost easier to think of the smell, the screams, of the dying city and that terrible dragon.

"She still have wanted me to save you," Arya added, "She’s very noble like that."

Jaime nodded painfully "Is she .... safe?"

Arya's eyes darkened and her face hardened. "She's safe."

That, if nothing else, was a relief, although it was clear Arya would say nothing further about the her.

"And Daenerys?" he asked.

"Dead," Arya said coolly. "Jon killed her."

*So there's another Kingslayer. Or Queenslayer.* Jaime thought sourly. *And this one fucked his monarch first.* That's a special twist.

*This time I saved mine.*

Or did he? He turned to look at Cersei.

"Cersei, is she..." he remembered her, small and curled under the blanket, Davos' advice that she was 'worse'.

"She's gravely injured, and not right in the head," said Arya. "If she ever was."

He needed to see her, touch her, confirm for himself. "Can you help me get to her?"
Arya shook her head. "You're like to fall apart if we move you again."

Would that really be so bad? He thought darkly. To fall to apart, to fall to pieces. To be torn to shreds. Isn't that what Cersei and I did to this world, with our treason and our bastard children? We sparked this war, and Dany was the inevitable result of it.

He and Cersei had no right to be alive. He didn't even want to be alive. And yet here he was. And thousands upon thousands of innocents were dead.

Maybe there are gods, after all, and they have an ironic sense of humor?

It was too much, he was too tired. He didn't want to think. He lay back down, and longed for the warm embrace of oblivion.

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**BRIENNE**

**Winterfell**

Even as preparations were afoot for the Great Council, Tormund Giantsbane came courting. Or some approximation of it.

Oh, he undoubtedly had another reason to travel from Castle Black, but he took the opportunity to investigate the rumors. How the news of her circumstances reached him so quickly Brienne had no idea. And men say women gossip.

The big wildling offered a rough kind of comfort, all wide smiles and open arms and dramatic displays of unabashed affection. He did not hide his desire, and in that way he couldn't have been more different to reserved and awkward Jaime (not to mention all the others). She allowed him to embrace her when he saw her, albeit she did not hug him in return but instead patted him on the back. He smelt of leather and fur and sweat and probably hadn't bathed in a while, but it was oddly masculine. For the days he was at Winterfell, he doted on her, and she found it easier to find his attention almost flattering now, where it had been bewildering and disconcerting before. He was not unattractive, she supposed, although she felt no real desire. He was as tall as her – *Jaime wasn’t* – and broader – *Jaime was smaller than me*. He would be capable of enveloping her in his arms and body as men typically did with women. It would be easy, so easy, and even if she didn't love him, or even want him, he clearly wanted her, and giving in might relieve some of the longing she constantly felt.

*I am no longer a maid*, she thought. *What does it matter?*

But it did.

She had had one lover. A man she had loved for years. She had no need of any more. She gently declined him.

When his amorous attentions failed, Tormund tried a more practical route.

"I want babies." He said to her. "Big babies, with you. Giants, they'd be. They'd make us both proud."

It was oddly gratifying to be openly wanted by one man for the very thing that had made her so
undesirable to most others, yet she could not persuade herself it was any different to being wanted for Tarth. It was about her womb, not her soul. Tormund barely even knew her.

"You already have babies," she had pointed out. "Two, at least. You've spoken of them."

"Proof of my potency! And grown, not babes. They wouldn't worry you," he laughed "Up north there's always room for more,"

"I have no desire to birth bastards," she had said then, somewhat cruelly.

Not easily offended - again, so different to prickly Jaime - Tormund had taken it in his stride. He had even made what he clearly thought was a tremendously generous offer. "I'll marry you if you want", he'd promised. "I know it's important to you southron women. Then we can have 'em properly. Ours, or yours, if you'd prefer. I can raise them, or you can raise them, or we can raise 'em together. I won't bother you the rest of the time, you get to do your knightly business, and you get to be a mother. Think on it."

She vaguely told him she would. She'd thought at the time she had no intention of doing so, but the idea curdled in her mind nonetheless. Being with Jaime had stirred in her maternal feelings she’d long abandoned. On many nights when she'd lain beside him, she'd dreamed of their children. Tall and blonde, with his looks and her sense of duty. Jaime had usually been careful not to spill in her, but on a few occasions when the moment had consumed him, and he'd lost control, they had both said nothing, and she'd never considered moon tea. It was silent acknowledgement on both their parts to accept what may come.

She could still have children, she supposed, with or even without Tormund. Maege Mormont had children without a husband. *Unless Maege was the bear, but Tormund does not seem the metaphorical type.* She thought of little Lyanna Mormont, strong and defiant till the end. She would be proud to raise such a child. She imagined taking the big wildling as her lover, birthing blonde and red headed children, suckling them as youngsters and raising them fierce, and strong. There was honour in that, as much as in any battle. But her stomach still turned at the thought of opening her legs for another, even with the promise of those giant, fierce children.

She declined Tormund's offer, telling him that she was soon to ride south, with Sansa and the northern delegation, to Kings Landing, and what new duties may befall her.

On her final morning at Winterfell, Brienne stood in her room that had been her home for so long now, and lost herself in her memories, most of which were of Jaime.

*She remembered the frenetic need and awkward clumsiness of their first night together, Jaime's wine-soaked breath against her ear as he shuddered and groaned and spilled inside her. His endearing apology and promise, later well fulfilled, to 'do better next time.'*

*She remembered him laying her on the bed and trailing his lips down her body. When he reached her curls, she'd closed her legs in embarrassment, but he'd teased them open with his arms, and, ignoring her shocked protest, had lowered his mouth to her folds and explored her with his tongue until she cried her release. He'd crawled back up her body, and when he kissed her she'd tasted herself on his lips, and invited him inside her body.*

*She remembered the night he taken her by the fire. She was on her hands and knees as he went into her from behind, his hand left hand clasping at her hip as she pushed back and ground against him, delighted and scandalised by what they were doing.*

*She remembered the night she first tasted him. She'd helped him out of his breeches, and then sunk*
to her knees before him and took him in her mouth. He’d clasped her hair and called her name, and tasted himself on her lips afterwards.

She remembered, too, lying in bed and talking, one of her legs thrown across his and her arm on his chest. Or lying with her back pressed to him, his damp cock against her backside and his hand on her breast.

She remembered helping him get dressed and undressed, an intimate routine they had fallen into so easily. Sharing wine in the evenings, and sometimes stale bread in the mornings, a breakfast smuggled from the Great Hall the night before so they could steal some extra time in the mornings.

Laughing and talking and holding hands and being happy.

He must have been happy. She knows she was.

Brienne circled the room a final time, touching the desk, the bed, the mantle over the fireplace. Bidding it all farewell. She stood in the doorway and took a deep breath. Let it out slowly, calmly. Then she closed the door on that chapter of her life, and Winterfell. In her heart, she knew she wouldn't be back.

JAIME

An Inn - Rosby

Hours, days, weeks passed. He healed, and grew stronger, until he could walk, limping, and at least carry a sword again, even if his days of using it well were gone.

Crippled legs and a missing hand, a fine fucking state.

From what he could gather, the situation at Kings landing was dire. Davos was organising a council of great houses in an effort to resolve the deadlock. He struggled to write letters and mainly sat swearing. Arya came and went, relaying messages and telling stories of conspiracies and other news, unable to sit still for two minutes. The news was that Tyrion was so far safe, pending this fabled trial, and that was all Jaime really cared about.

Jaime was in the humiliating position of being half-prisoner, half-patient of people who should be his enemies, but seemed to be allies, and whose motivation for helping him seemed fucking crazy. Still, prisoner or not, he made himself useful. He provided Davos with the names of the remaining members of the great families and with advice on how to approach them and who to speak to. He told Arya about secret passages in the Red Keep and how to find records and documents that he'd never read but assumed could be important.

The rest of time, he tended to Cersei. Or what Cersei had become. The rock that had cracked her skull and the infection that ravaged her body had caused damage to her mind, and with it had gone much of both her scheming and her pain. She moved from present to past, speaking of visiting father one moment, destroying her enemies the next. Yet there were moments of near lucidity, and during those she was dangerous.

“How are we not dead?” She asked, in one such moment. He had explained as best he could, and Cersei had laughed in disbelief. “Fools”, she said. “They cannot cage a lion in their midst. Learn what you can Jaime, so we may vanquish this Jon Snow.”
"Those who betrayed me will regret it," she promised him, later, in another such moment, her fingers clawing at his shirt, green eyes wild with anger.

He wondered if she meant him, or the people at Kings Landing, or the world in general. She'd cursed them all. Cersei against the world, or Cersei and him against them all. But he no longer wanted to be a part of that. That Jaime had died beneath the rubble, if not well before.

"You need to let it go," he said softly, stroking her hair.

"Never," she hissed.

Other times, she would be drift away. She would sing, her voice still beautiful, or laugh and giggle or yell and scream at things she alone saw. But mainly she slept, and they all encouraged that.

"She's not long for this world, the corruption grows within her," Maester Rivers said, "But she's a fighter, and she’s going to take her time dying. You've got a job ahead of you."

*Typical Cersei*, Jaime thought. He stroked her face gently, careful not to wake her.

He wasn’t a natural nursemaid. He had no idea what to do nor any inclination to do it, but he did what he could. He had no choice. It was his penance. *Brienne would know what to do*, he thought idly. Despite her warriors heart, she had cared for him without complaint on that excruciating journey with the bloody mummers, when he lost his hand, his identity and, briefly, his will to live. She’d tended him dedication and kindness, if not skill. *She was gentler than Cersei, despite being capable of killing three men. Perhaps, that's when I started to fall in love with her,* he mused.

Eventually, the measter pronounced his services at an end.

"You have healed sufficiently," he said. "I can do no more for you, or your poor wife. You must be on your way."

"Wherever that is," Jaime answered, uncertainly.

Rivers gave him an almost sympathetic look as he tidied up his things. "What do you think you'll do?"

"I have no idea, we have no home to go to," he answered, more or less honestly. He was not really sure if he ever had a home. He had lived in the White Tower for a quarter century, from barely a child until his Tommen discharged him, after which he held a cell elsewhere in the Red Keep. But he had never truly thought of either as home. Home had been Cersei, until it wasn't. Then, for that month at Winterfell, it had been Brienne. People mattered to him more than places. *And I am with the wrong ones.*

"You and many others," the measter relied, drawing him back to the conversation. "I've offered your daughter a place here, if she wants it."

My daughter. He felt a stab of pain, as sharp as any blade. His heart clenched. He said without thinking, "my daughter is dea -"

Then Davos' was there, thrusting another silver sickle at the measter, muttering that his 'son' was traumatised, and sending the man on his way.

"Do you think he suspects?" asked Jaime, watching the measter go.
"He knows we are not who we say, but nothin' more than that," Davos shrugged. "He is used to asking no questions about his patients, and we worries more about me than you. Fears I'm fermenting a revolution for the King o' the North from his town."

"He's not wrong."

"That he's not. Thinks I'll bring the Dragon Queen's men down upon us. I don't think it's likely. But we've clearly outstayed our welcome. We are leaving for Kings Landing."

"What are you going to do with us?" Jaime asked Davos cautiously.

"I've had enough of death, Ser Jaime," Davos sighed. "But I'm trying to put this realm back together, and it's not an easy task. Your brother is to face trial for releasing you. I think we can all do without your evidence in support of that contention. Your current status is 'dead'. Tyrion saw your bodies. We don't want word getting out that you or your sister lived, at least not until after the trial, and we certainly don't want any suggestion that Tyrion lied. We've got a ship leaving from Duskendale in a fortnight, and I'm thinking you'll be crossin' the sea to Pentos on it. You and your sister. What you do after that is a matter for you. But I'll not be tellin' anyone you're alive, and nor will Arya here, not 'til everything's settled down anyway."

Arya laughed. "Once this bloody council is over, I won't even be in Westeros to tell anyone."

Jaime nodded. A new life, a new start, it was exactly what Tyrion had suggested. What Tyrion may still die for organising. But there was no way he could help his brother survive other than to stay out of it.

There is nothing here for me here anyway, he thought determinedly. Not anymore.

Except Brienne. Unbidden, her image came to his mind. Flaxen hair and broad shoulders and her startling, lovely eyes. She has such beautiful eyes. It was easy to lose himself in the memory of her blue eyes. Black in the dark, filled with tears as she cried for him to stay. Wide and frantically meeting his on the battlefield, seeking confirmation that they were both still alive, then offering reassurance that if they kept together, they could stay that way. Slightly unfocused, sparkling with mirth, delightfully tipsy, as they had laughed over Tyrion's stupid game. Hooded, dark with passion and filled with trust as he gently went into her that first, exquisite time.

Eyes I will never stare into again if I do this, he thought sadly.

"You won't tell Brienne?" he asked, unable to keep her name off his lips.

Arya and Davos exchanged a look, and Davos nodded to Arya. Your turn.

"I thought about it, Kingslayer. She hid it well, but you hurt her badly. I don't think she can or should go through that again. She's best thinking you're dead and getting on with her life."

"Isn't that Brienne's choice to make?" Jaime asked.

"But what choice are you offering her?" Davos asked softly. "There is none. You chose Cersei. All you can offer Brienne now is knowing that you're alive, and that she can't have you. What purpose would that serve?"

Arya smiled, almost maliciously. "You go be with your queen. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Jaime nodded resignedly. He supposed it had been what he wanted, in those chaotic days when he thought Cersei was doomed. But being with her had meant dying with her, leaving the world as we
came into it, or dying to save her and the baby. It had all seemed so simple, so fucking dramatic, to end it all together, a deservedly ironic finish to the war their fucked up obsession had started. It was not until Tyrion came up with the idea of the boat to Essos that he had even thought about escape, and by then he'd been so desperate to hang onto anything that he didn't think about it enough. A one-armed man and a row boat. Really Tyrion? How the fuck did either of us think that would work? Were we even thinking at all?

He must have looked a conflicted mess. Davos sighed, and placed a hand on his shoulder, almost sympathetically.

“You took off after Brienne vouched for you, Lannister, and after you made such a show at that feast with Giantsbane, that everyone knew what was happenin' between you. You made her look like a fool. She pretends not to care, but the rest of us can't, and her reputation has taken a beating. Sansa did what she could, she even put it about that you were to marry, and the victory high got the better of you both so you fell into bed early. Wouldn’t be the first time it happened. It helped. We can’t have you undoing that.”

I wouldn’t undo it, he thought, almost desperately. I’d marry her. He should have already done it, married her that morning after, under the Weirwood Tree. Repaired the damage he, Westeros’ most dishonourable man, had done to its most honourable woman.

But Davos continued. “Even so, her reputation hangs by a string. Podrick had to beat down some fellow who made a comment about her being your whore. No doubt others still think it. Unless you’ve got something genuine to offer her, something that can repair all that damage you've done, best you stay away so she can keep it at that.”

Davos was right. What could he offer her? Nothing right now. Not while Cersei lived, and his obligation was to her. Maybe nothing ever. He should hope she moved on, but he was too selfish for that.

The next day, Davos gave him a small bag of gold, a plain sword, and a basic cart with a beaten old horse. Jaime half-led, half-carried Cersei, dressed in a plain linen shift and brown wimple, to the simple wooden bench and placed her next to him. She looked at it disdainfully.

“Are we truly reduced to this?” She whispered.

"Unless you want to walk.”

She muttered something but settled onto the bench.

He still couldn't walk well. The muscles in his legs were stitched together, and it was unlikely that he would ever move without a limp. His hand had not miraculously grown back, so he had tied on a stuffed glove to disguise its absence. It would pass cursory inspection, but not greater scrutiny. Still it hardly mattered, the war had left countless amputees. He had few skills to speak of, few prospects, but the gold exceeded most peasants' life earnings. He just needed to be able to keep it, as any good bandit could take him out right now.

"Thank you," he said to Davos, although he wasn't sure if he was really grateful.

"You're welcome," Davos said gruffly. "I'll try to contact you when things settle down, if its safe, or if we need you. Otherwise, keep a low profile in Pentos or you'll fuck us all up."

Jaime nodded, flicked the reigns. Cersei leaned against him, a rare show of affection. “Shall we go back to Casterly Rock?” she asked. She was in her good mood, then. She hasn't done that since
she was seven, and maybe not even then.  He trundled down the road, leaving Rosby behind.

He had no intention of going to Casterly Rock, or Pentos either for that matter. Nearly everyone fleeing the Seven Kingdoms went to the Free Cities, and by now it had to resemble a Highgarden tourney. True, Cersei and he were nearly unrecognisable, dull and dark and middle aged, but someone, somewhere would have the sharp eyes to notice. He didn't want to be found, and he didn't want Cersei to be found. She would not want anyone to see her in her current state. Most of all, he did not want word getting back that Tyrion may have lied.

But he needed to find somewhere safe. Somewhere where Cersei could live out her life in peace. After that, he would be free.

He had a place in mind. It was a gamble, but weren’t they already dead?

One night as he'd lain with Brienne, she'd told him about her journey with Pod, through the Riverlands to the Eyrie in search of Sansa. Avoiding Harrenhal, they had traveled near Saltpans, and a strange island. "There was a man there, the Elder Brother. He said he former knight who had served Rhaeger, but who had been reborn as a priest. He gave us succor for a night. I would like, one day, to thank him" Her words had stirred some distant memory in him. An echo from his youth.

The Quiet Isle, he thought.

If she wants me, she may look for me there. Not that he could see any reason why she would want at look for him, but there was comfort in even a glimmer of hope.

He turned to look at Cersei. She was in a quiet mood, singing some soft song to herself. Even faded and tarnished, she was still beautiful in the sunlight, as long as you ignored the corruption inside.

"I’m dying Jaime," she said, resignedly. “I thought we’d die together.”

“We did.”

He did not believe in the Gods, not really, but if they did exist, then surely his survival was purpose. Perhaps he would find what they wanted of him. Something told him the answers lay north. And in any case, he had nowhere else to go.

Chapter End Notes

I know the Quiet Isle and Saltpans didn’t feature in the show, but Brienne and Pod we’re wandering for a while, so it is possible they passed by. While the more direct route to the Eyrie and the Bloody Gate would have taken her by Harrenhal, but I can’t see Brienne wanting to go there again (baths notwithstanding).
Legacies

Chapter Notes

This is all Brienne, back to Jaime and Cersei next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brienne

Kings Landing

Even miles out, the approach to Kings Landing was confronting. The last time Brienne had been there, she had been setting off on her quest to find Sansa. It was the first time she had worn Jaime’s armour and sword, the first time she met Pod. She remembered tree-lined roads, lush green hollows and dappled sunlight. Even if she was romanticising it, which she wouldn’t put past herself, what remained was so unfamiliar it was hard to believe it was the the same place. The hills for miles surrounding the city had been denuded of trees and even grass and scoured for usable chucks of rock. The odd animal carcass lay on the brown earth, white bones picked clean, while wind blew the dust into small willy-willies.

They rode past in silence, no one speaking a word, the only sound the clopping on their horses’ shoes on the hard ground and the grating of the wheels of Bran’s carriage.

As they got closer to the city, Brienne took Pod and a contingent of their men, and headed in to scout, leaving Sansa, Bran, Robyn Arryn and the others with the main body of the Vale’s troops - most of the North’s were already here. When the city, or what remained of it, came into view, every one of them pulled up their horses to stare, stunned and uncomprehending, at the devastation. The once terracotta roofs were collapsed and burned black, and the city covered in white ash. Unwillingly, Brienne’s eyes were drawn toward the remains of the Red Keep. Much of it was in ruins, although Maegor’s Holdfast and White Sword Tower appeared to be more or less standing. She felt the familiar, sick feeling of grief rise in her chest and she looked away quickly. She was determined that she would not cry again, and certainly not here, among her men. But she could sense Pod’s eyes on her, could picture the sad and sympathetic look on his face, and acts of kindness were the greatest challenge to keeping that vow.

The continued on, skirting the half-collapsed walls and shattered gates, the tents of the northern soldiers and shanties of the refugees under their protection. Wide-eyed small folk looked out from behind cracked walls and make-shift canvas shelters. The atmosphere was tense, too. Unsullied soldiers and northern guards looked uneasily at each other from across the informal lines that used to be the city boundaries. One wrong move and the situation could get out of hand fast.

Sansa’s contingent had been allocated an area among the northern troops on the outside of the city. Brienne directed the men in erecting tents and making a livable campsite. She and Pod would share a tent, as usual, any uncomfortableness between them having worn away in the long distant past. She didn’t expect Pod to spend much time in their tent anyway. Even ruined as it was, Kings Landing had plenty of drinking establishments and whorehouses, and she never denied him his entertainments, so long as his duties were fulfilled first.

They were nearly finished setting up when a trainee maester – *do they get younger every year?*
delivered her a scroll, embossed with the sun and stars seal of Tarth. It was from her father. She read it quickly, her stomach twisting. He had appointed her as his representative at the Great Council, given her directions as to what to do, and then gone on to set out what was happening at home, including news that surprised and disconcerted her. She did not know what to think, so she put it away.

“I’m going for a walk, Pod,” she declared.

“Would you like some company ser,” he asked, having finished arranging the cots.

“If you wish.”

By her taciturn standards, it was an open invitation to join her.

Pod hurried to strap on his blade and follow, doing up the buckle as they strode out of the tent. *He’s come a long way*, Jaime had observed. He really had. So had they, as knight and squire. Pod’s presence near her was reassuring. He was, all things considered, probably her closest friend, other than maybe Sansa. *The one steady thing in my life, and Jaime’s greatest gift*, she thought, more important to her even than the knighthood.

Brienne and Pod strode around the outskirts of the city, cautious of the uneasy peace between the Unsullied and the Northmen. *These men had fought together at the end of the world mere months ago, and now they are ready to kill each other*. It was a sad state of affairs. She tried to picture the young Dragon Queen with the blond hair and fierce eyes turning her dragon in the city, but it was too depressing. She had never much liked Daenerys, but she had never thought she would do *that*. She had never thought the queen’s troops, men she had fought beside too, would behave like they reportedly had either.

Then she remembered the devastation of the Riverlands that Pod and she had ridden through so many years before. The burnt out cottages, the plundered farms, the dead women hanging on ropes. Much of what had gone on there had been wanton destruction, serving no purpose but bloodlust and revenge. There were just fewer people to witness it. Would those men in the Riverlands, with their swords and axes and violence have behaved any differently if given a dragon? Or licence by their leader? Most likely they would have done much worse, nearly every one of them. *Violence begets violence*. Legends be damned, war was no longer even remotely romantic.

Finally, they made their way to the top of the Hill of Rhaenys, where they stopped outside the Dragon Pit and looked over the city. Brienne allowed her eyes to rest on the remains of the Red Keep. Tyrion had said that Cersei and Jaime had died in each other’s arms in the caverns beneath. It seemed such a sad, pointless end, crushed in the dark, but she supposed that he would not have been unhappy with it. To die protecting his queen till the last, like all the other members of the Queensguard. They had all, apparently to a man, stayed loyal to her in the end, although Jaime alone had gone back for her. Brienne could feel tears behind her eyes, again, and blinked them away. She couldn’t change the past. She needed to get over this.

She glanced at Pod. This time he was determinedly looking elsewhere, giving her privacy. That boundless empathy, something she sometimes struggled to offer in return, was one of his greatest strengths. She loved him for it.

She wondered how much he really knew. *Probably all of it*. He’d been there the second time she said goodbye to Jaime, when they left Kings Landing, and the third time at Riverrun. He had undoubtedly seen her gazing back at him on both occasions. He’d been there for the drinking game, and he had seen Jaime follow her out of the Great Hall. And there followed was the month
where he had hardly ever been called to assist with her armor. No matter how highly he thought of her, he must have guessed what was going on then. The rest of Winterfell had. And then Jaime was gone. It didn’t take a genius to work out he had left her, and Pod was rather bright, particularly about people. *He knows.*

She wonders if he believes the rumours that Jaime and she was betrothed. *If so, he’d be right to be upset that he hadn’t been told.* But he had said nothing. *Or maybe he put them around.* She’d thought it was Sansa, but it was as like to be Pod.

“*It is as if the world and everyone in it went crazy for a moon’s turn,*” Pod said, sadly, interrupting, but also confirming, her thoughts. “*And those of us left alive have to pick up the pieces.*”

She nodded. “*Or sweep away the ashes.*”

....

Brienne was somewhat bemused to find herself at the Great Council meeting, sitting beside Sansa rather than standing behind her, and being given a vote. Tarth was not a great house by any means, but it had proved to be a survivor. With most of the mainland devastated by war, it was also a source of food, and that suddenly gained the island the kind of respect weapons or bannermen may have done a decade ago. *Father would have loved this,* Brienne thought sadly, wishing he was there.

Brienne had never been fond of politics, and had little interest in oratory and, she liked to think, minimal susceptibility to it. *Words are wind,* her father was like to say. She wasn't particularly persuaded by Tyrion's speech, or by the option of Bran, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to this than she could see, that somehow everyone was being played. But her father had made it clear she was to support the new Lord of Storm’s End, to which he had sworn fealty, and so that was that. She voted “aye”, along with Lord Gendry, as her father wished.

As soon as the Great Council meeting finished, she made her apologies and started to leave. Brienne would contentedly discuss matters of duty for hours, and she made an effort to say a few words to each of her men, but she rarely socialised beyond that. She found small talk a challenge even at the best of times, and this was far from the best of times.

Tyrion caught her eye as she made her way to the exit, but she looked away quickly. She knew it was completely unreasonable, but she could not help but blame him a little bit for Jaime's death. He had been captured, and confined, and had Tyrion not offered him that ridiculous boat he may have stayed there, relatively safe. He may have lived. *Although he would likely never have forgiven himself, or he would just have found some other way to die for her,* or *Grey Worm would have simply executed him anyway,* she thought sadly.

She was almost free of the Dragon Pit when she heard the unmistakable accent of Ser Davos calling her name.

"Ser Brienne."

She looked around at him, and stopped politely. "Ser Davos."

Despite their rocky start, Brienne had developed a great deal of affection for Davos. Unfortunately, going by the sad look on his face, she could already guess what this was going to be about, and she could not handle anymore sympathy.

The Onion Knight must have sensed her reticence. He paused before her, and shuffled a little. "I
hope you are well..." he said gruffly, and surprisingly awkwardly. 

"I am very well, thank you." She said stiffly in reply. “And you?”

He continued to looked nervous. “Fine, for my age at least.”

Davos was usually among the most amiable people at Winterfell, typically able to talk for hours about anything from training schedules to the soup. *What was this hesitancy about?*

"It’s good to see you, Se Davos. If you would excuse me...” she began, resuming her walk to the exit.

But Davos put out a hand. “Wait...”

Then another voice called him. “Davos, let’s go!”

Brienne looked over to the source of the voice. Arya. The Stark girl seemed as keen to be out of here as Brienne, although she apparently intended on taking Davos with her. Brienne threw a quick glance at Gendry. He was still sitting on his chair, watching Arya. He looked bereft. *At least I am not the only heartbroken one*, Brienne thought. Even the handsome lord of Storms End could be rejected.

She looked back to Davos. His mouth was still open, as if to say something, but then he inclined his head to her and backed away. “Duty calls. I’m glad to see you are well, m’lady.”

Whatever affection she felt for the old knight, she was glad of his departure. She didn’t think she could withstand any more sympathy. *Yes, I lost by virginity to a cad who deserted me. Poor Brienne. Maybe I should make an announcement. I appreciate all your sympathy....Except that was not how she felt at all. She was sorry about how things ended, and aware of the effect on her reputation, but she could not regret what she did with Jaime, and she wasn’t angry or bitter. She wanted her companions to know she wasn't. But there was no way to correct them without looking even more pathetic, or inviting some kind of retaliatory attack on Jaime.*

She left quickly after that. She headed back to her tent and filled Pod in on what had happened at the Great Council. He laughed in disbelief at the choice of Bran, and she happily joined him. He beamed at her, clearly happy to see her happy again, his eyes soft.

“T’m fine, Pod,” she reassured him, before he could say anything.

He nodded, “I know, my lady. But we worry because we care.”

That time with Pod was the best part of her day. She went to bed early, *as old people do*, and Pod disappeared to do whatever it is that the young do.

Morning dawned, and Sansa summoned her. *Queen Sansa*, Brienne thought. *Queen of the North.* Sansa had actually done it.

Brienne bowed when she saw her. "Your Grace".

"Not yet, Brienne," Sansa said, but she was smiling. She was still wearing that high necked black grown, despite the relative warmth of the south. She must have been hot, but she looked cool and perfect. Brienne would be sweating like a pig with her hair pasted to her in such an outfit.

They chatted for a little while about inconsequential matters, and then Sansa leaned over, took her hand, and said seriously.
"Brienne, what are your plans for the future?"

Brienne was taken aback. "I am sworn to you, your Grace. Where you go, I go."

But she saw something pass across Sansa's eyes. Sorrow. A dread began to settle in her Brienne's stomach. "Unless, you do not desire my services anymore..." she began.

Sansa sighed. "It's not that I don't want you Brienne. You're my most loyal companion and, frankly, my best friend. But I am left with something of a dilemma. I need to forge an independent North, without ties to the south. And to do that, I need to break free of the connections that I have here."

"Such as your southron knight," Brienne finished, quietly. Your southron knight who vouched for the Lannister who then betrayed them. Who fucked the Kingslayer. Who some of your dour northmen call a whore.

"Well, yes, although it is more complicated than that. I intend to establish a northern Queensguard. As much as you would be my first choice as lord commander, I cannot appoint you to that role. I must choose someone from the north."

Brienne nodded. Again, the feeling of grief was rising in her, but also a sense of finality. Hadn’t she sensed, before she left, that her future lay somewhere else?

"I would welcome you to stay on as a member of my Queensguard, but your talents are ..." Sansa’s voice faded somewhat.

"Better used elsewhere," Brienne finished for her. The politest way out. She nodded.

Sansa tightened her grip on Brienne's hand, and put her other over the top. She caught Brienne’s gaze, and Brienne was surprised to see tears in her eyes. After a moment, Brienne put her own hands over Sansa’s.

"I will miss you, my friend," Sansa said. And Brienne believed her. She grasped her hand back.

"Me too," she replied. And she meant it as well.

Then Sansa did something Brienne would never have expected. She leaned over, wrapped her arms around her, and pulled her close. Brienne hugged her back, and this time she left the tears come.

Finally, they pulled apart, and Sansa met Briene’s eyes. “I am sorry, for what I said to Jaime. I need to tell you that now, or I never will,” she said.

Brienne nodded. “I’m sorry too, but I think, whether or not that had happened, he had to go back. For whatever reason. I don’t blame you. Or even him.”

"You are a far more forgiving woman than I."

There is at least one dead king who’d disagree with that, Brienne thought. But she said nothing.

After her meeting with Sansa, Brienne wandered down to the shores of the Blackwater. She took her father's scroll out, read it again, then sat on the bank and watched the water run by. It would continue along this course, through Blackwater Bay to the Narrow Sea, and maybe eventually to Tarth. I could go there too, she thought. Get on her horse and ride south, to Storm’s End, and Shipwreck Bay. She could even take Pod, introduce him to her father. As Evenstar, he
could gift Pod land, and maybe find him a good match, a islander girl, with long blonde hair, just like his Lannister lords. Pod was pleasant, easy-going and hard working, and he sang beautifully. He would fit in. She wondered if he’d like that, his own lands and estate. He’d make a very good lord. She decided to at least make him the offer.

She’d entertained dreams of taking Jaime to Tarth, too. Introducing him to her father. Selwyn would not have liked Jaime anywhere near as much as Pod, but she was of such an age that he would have considered any fiancé as better than none. Jaime would have made a good Evenstar, if she could get him to concentrate. She could imagine them working together, he doing all the speeches and carousing and public dispensing of justice, and she training the troops and managing stores.

*Yes, yes, while raising your seven blonde children. You have to stop this Brienne.*

"My brother was an idiot."

The voice behind her pulled her out of her reverie, and she jumped at the sudden intrusion, instinctively reaching for her sword. She turned to see Tyrion approaching. He was already wearing his Hand badge, she noticed, and was much neater and cleaner than before. Despite their height difference, he bore more than a passing, painful, resemblance to Jaime. He came to stand beside her, shorter than her still, even as she sat. She wondered how he’d found her.

She looked back to the water. "I know."

"But he did love you."

"I know," she said, calmly. *Just not enough.* She sounded wistful, even to her own hears, but she hoped Tyrion didn't hear any sorrow or regret. She also did not want to discuss this, not here, not again, and certainly not with Tyrion. She could feel the tears start behind her eyes again. This was ridiculous. She wound up the scroll and began to put it away, getting ready to leave.

Clearly not taking the hint, Tyrion took a few more steps, and then sat down beside her, gently.

"And he was happy. When he was with you. I mean, I'd never seen him that happy before."

She started to stand. "I'm glad I could make him happy."

"But his past, our family - " he continued.

"Tyrion, I know. Please". Her voice was firm, not angry. He opened his mouth again but after catching a glimpse of her face, he closed it and backed off.

Brienne found herself hovering uncertainly, halfway between staying and leaving. "What are you doing here Tyrion."

He snorted. "Can't I just be trying to bond?"

She gave him a sharp look. "People do not approach me for enjoyable conversation."

"I think you'll find they would if you gave them a chance, Lady Brienne," Tyrion said cautiously. "Everyone likes you. But you're right, I do have an ulterior motive today."

"You're re-establishing the kingsguard," she said, more a statement that a question.

He nodded. "Yes."
Brienne unfurled the scroll in her hand, looked at it again, and made a decision.

"My father plans on remarrying." She said, calmly. "My new stepmother is younger than me."

Tyrion nodded. "I see."

“She has plenty of time to have children. One will be a boy. I suppose I won’t be heir to Tarth much longer.”

She tasted the words on her tongue. It was the first time she had said them aloud, and she still wasn’t sure how she felt. Sadness, yes, but also relief. There was a beckoning sense of freedom there too. She was unsure why she was telling Tyrion this. She hadn’t even told Pod, or Sansa. Perhaps she was telling him because he was the closest thing she had to Jaime, or he was just prepared to listen, or maybe she was still in shock.

"My father asked me to come home some months ago. I had told him I was sworn to Sansa's service and I couldn’t. Until then, he'd had women on his arm, but not in his bed. I suppose he has now truly given up on me. He could not wait for an heir forever."

That was what the logical part of her mind told her, anyway. The vicious, self-doubting part wondered, also, if perhaps word had reached him that she had dishonored herself with Jaime Lannister. The eligible men of the Stormlands would not have taken well to that news. Defilement, they would consider it, and that as much as her appearance, her mannerisms, her independence, would render her unmarriageable for any reason other than the acquisition of Tarth. Her father loved her, of that she had no doubt, and he would never disdain her, nor even love her less for falling in love, but he was also a man of duty and honour, and his first allegiance was always to Tarth. With his sole heir a daughter in her third decade, with no prospects of marriage and no interest in returning home, he had little option but to make another heir. She couldn't feel angry toward him.

"I'm sorry Brienne..." Tyrion said.

"I'm not," she said, honestly.

So much of her old life was drifting away from her. She’d nursed romantic fantasies of Jaime for many years, during which time she'd never so much as looked at another man. And now he was gone. Her oath to Lady Stark, and then to her daughters, had been the focus of her life, but Arya didn’t need or want her, and Sansa required a northern Queensguard, so that was gone too. The burden of being the next Evenstar had been a shadow on the horizon, filled with terrifying social engagements and a loveless marriage, but now it seemed so she could change course on that, too. She was adrift, uncertain, without oaths or promises to fulfill. I should be bereft. But she wasn’t. For the first time since she could remember, she was free to chose her own path.

"Ser Brienne, there is a place for you here, as Lord Commander, if you wish it." Tyrion said gently.

She turned as looked at him in surprise.

"Lord Commander?” She had been prepared to ask for a position in the kingsguard, but Lord Commander...

"You are the one of the most experienced and respected knights in this realm, Brienne. Everyone knows you are honourable, trustworthy and good to your word. Bran would be honoured if you would serve him. Think on it."
Think on it.

She didn’t need to. She had spent a near lifetime dreaming of such an honour. The kingsguard was a life of duty and respect. Yes, it was a life without family, or children. But what are the prospects of those anyway? She’d rejected Tormund and his offer of no-strings-attached children. She was not Maege Mormont, she would not raise bastards. What she felt for Jaime had been so intense, so all-consuming, so enduring, she found it difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of loving anyone else. Not now anyway. Would she marry someone for less than love? Maybe. If she had to, certainly to make heirs for Tarth. But if her father had other heirs, she need not do so. That was a tremendous relief.

She looked at Tyrion. “All right. Yes. I would be honoured.”

Tyrion blinked. “That was easier than I expected. Are you sure you don’t want to think about it?”

She shook her head. “No. I just want to get started.”

But Tyrion looked uncertain.

“Is there a problem?” she asked. A little tingle of fear went through her. Had he asked her out of kindness, or sympathy, expecting her to decline?

“I wanted to plant a seed, maybe encourage you to negotiate the terms, not get an immediate answer.” He admitted.

Oh. Tyrion gave her an appraising look. She bristled. More fucking pity. She could tell he was wondering if she was making an emotional decision borne of heartbreak. Would he wonder the same if I was a man?

“You think I am making a rash decision?”

“It has been the season for it,” he observed dryly.

She managed a half-hearted smile at that, and turned back to look at the water.

“Maybe I am.” She wondered what to tell him, and then she decided to be honest. "I loved Jaime. For years, I think. In the end. I had only a month with him, but it was good. Had he wanted- had he asked me, I would have married him. I would have had his children...” She can hear her voice catch, traitorously, at that. “I know what I am giving up, Tyrion. If I hadn’t had that time with Jaime, I wouldn’t know, and I am grateful for it for that reason, among others. But I went for my entire life without it, and I don’t expect it again. I don’t even know if I want it again.”

Certainly, she never wanted to feel that kind of heartbreak again. She wasn't even convinced she'd let herself be that vulnerable again.

Her voice was cracking, again, and she didn’t want to cry, so she said nothing further.

And then she realised something. She did have a child. Pod. He was as close as she’d ever get to a son and she loved him with all her heart. Whatever happened, she would always have him. She hoped to be there to see his children one day, maybe be one of those overindulgent maiden aunts. Except not quite a maiden anymore, she thought with a soft smile.

Tyrion sighed. "Very well, it you're sure."

"I am."
Then she said, "actually, I do have one request."

"Name it."

"I want to put together a fitting ceremony and knight Pod."

Tyrion beamed. "It's about time, let's do it."

And so it was agreed.

Both ceremonies were arranged quickly, with almost undue haste. Brienne would undertake her vigil at the small sept in White Tower that night, be anointed by the High Septon at sunrise, and take vows the next morning. She would then, assuming she was still upright and awake, knight Pod that afternoon. She'd been content to do it that very day, but he'd asked for some time to assemble those of his many friends and family in Kings Landing. Brienne, on the other hand, had few people to invite, and was mainly keen to be sworn in before Sansa left so she at least had her and Pod, two people she truly cared about, there.

Brienne and Pod did a quick recon of White Tower, and had managed to salvage some of Cersei's queensguard armor, but each piece required a lot of work before it could be recommissioned for the new guard, or a woman. Brienne approved some sketches replacing stags and lions with crows, but the work would take days. Not willing to wait merely for the purposes of a costume, she was content to wear her blue armour with a new white cloak. She'd worn it for most of her journey, and she thought it fitting to wear it now, too, at the end of this path and the beginning of another. She strapped Oathkeeper to her waist, donned a pair of soft deerskin gloves that Sansa had gifted her and swept her hair back off her face. She was ready.

There was a cough at the door to the tent, and she called "enter". She had expected Pod, although he often forgot to announce himself these days, but to her surprise, both Sansa and Tyrion entered.

"Your Grace," she started, hastily bowing to Sansa.

Sansa waved her hand. "I'm not crowned yet, Brienne. In any case, we are in private."

She nodded, somewhat uncomfortable with informality in the presence of a soon-to-be-monarch, and Tyrion. Then her eyes traveled to Sansa's hands. The Lady of Winterfell carried a scabbard containing a sword, and Brienne immediately recognized the hilt. Widow's Wail. She gasped.

"We have a present for you," Tyrion announced rather unceremoniously.

Brienne eyed the weapon, cautiously, as Sansa held it out to her.

"I already have a sword," she whispered.

"Yes. And this is it's partner. They were both forged from Ice- " Tyrion said.

"My father's sword," Sansa intejected.

"They were separated, and then brought back together, at Winterfell, to protect the living from the dead. They belong together. It would be a shame to separate them again."

Brienne's hand hovered in the air near the sword, but she didn't quite touch it.

Tyrion urged her to take it with his eyes. "Jaime would want to you have it."

Sansa nodded in agreement. "And in case you have any doubts, I certainly want you to have it."
Brienne paused, then she shrugged and took the sword. It felt warm and familiar in her hand. *Oathkeeper's partner in every way*, she thought.

"I... Jaime once laughed at the idea of knights who wear two swords," she said softly.

Tyrion smiled. "Sounds like him. Probably tripped while wearing a second or something. But it is yours to do what you will with. You could wear it, or maybe gift it, to someone you think deserves it."

There was a twinkle in Tyrion's eye, and Brienne knew what he was suggesting.

"I think I know just who," she said, and he offered her a knowing smile.

Tyrion gave a quick look at Sansa, and she nodded. “I will see you tomorrow, Brienne. Good luck.”

Sansa left, and Brienne looked back at Tyrion. “All right, out with it.”

Tyrion frowned. “You really aren't one for small talk, are not?”

"No."

"And you don't have any wine?"

"No."

He gave a pained sigh. "All right. I wanted to talk to you, about my brother. I know you don’t want too -“

“No. But if you brought me a Valyrian steel sword to bribe me into listening, it must be important.”

"Maybe. Also uncomfortable. But I would appreciate if you heard me out.”

Brienne signed, and nodded.

Tried put his hands behind his back, and leaned a little forward to speak. *Jaime did that.* “I know what happened between the two of you."

"Of course you do. Just about everyone in Winterfell does.”

"They know a little, but not the full story. Please, I don’t want to defend my brother, but I do want to explain...”.

She gave him a long look. "You don't need to defend Jaime. I'm not angry with him."

"No, you probably aren't. You really are very understanding. I think only Davos may surpass you."

"You didn't come here to discuss Davos."

"No." He swallowed. *Jaime did that too, when nervous.* "Jaime and Cersei were together from the time they were young children. I know that’s...hard to think about, but it is what happened. He moderated her behavior all her life, just as she shaped him. She probably brought out much of the worst in him, but also some of the best, including that unquestioned devotion and capacity for love.”
Brienne nodded. She didn't trust herself to speak.

"They started as equals two halves of the same person. But it didn't stay that way. Jaime might have had more freedom and power, but Cersei was forced to grow up. She got married, had children, found herself another life, while Jaime stayed in the kingsguard and devoted himself to stealing moments with her as if they were doomed lovers in some fairy tale. He'd never had admitted it, but I think he liked the drama. And he needed her. He had built his life around her. Everything he had done, all those things he was ashamed of, he told himself - told me - that he did them for her. But, Cersei did not need him, especially after she became queen. Over time, she needed less and less of him, she didn't even take his counsel. Until all she took from him was sex."

Brienne blushed furiously at that, but Tyrion pushed on.

"I don't need to go into details, but he was absolutely loyal to her. Despite all the women who wanted him, who threw themselves at him, he never once strayed. Sex was what he gave Cersei, and it was inseparable from his love and devotion to her."

Brienne could feel the tears stinging the back of her eyes. She nodded.

"When he got to Winterfell, he wasn't very well, and he had only his experience with Cersei, and he didn't know what to do with the feelings he had. I tried to help, but he was fucking clueless, you both were. Gods knows how the stunted imp knew more than the golden lion." He shook his head, his hand clenching, as if holding a drink. No doubt he wanted one. "Brienne, I know what people say, what you might think. But you need to know, when Jaime went to your chambers, he didn't go to take advantage of you. Whatever his faults, he'd never do that. He wasn't capable of it. He wanted to say he loved you and he did that the only way he knew how, and gave you all he had to give you. Please understand that."

Brienne took a breath that sounded like a sob, and nodded. She barely trusted herself to speak.

"I do understand that. I mean, I did, but given how everyone else reacted, I wondered if I was delusional. It is good to hear it from someone else." Someone who knew Jaime the best.

"You're welcome," Tyrion sighed. He looked up at her. Way up. "I would have liked to have had you as a sister, Brienne. You are far less likely to kill me that Cersei. Obviously that won't be possible, but I would still like to be friends. We can bond over what a fucking idiot my brother was. We both miss him."

She nodded. Maybe in time. "I think we can. Thank you, Tyrion. Now if you would excuse me, I need to finish preparing."

... 

That night, Brienne strapped Widow's Wail to her waist, along with Oathkeeper, ate a simple dinner at bread and cheese, emptied her bladder, and then went to kneel before the alter to the Seven in the Hand's Tower. Bran had been as unconcerned by the ceremony, as he was by just about everything else, but Brienne had felt it an important tradition to maintain. As far as she knew, every previous kingsguard had undertaken his vigil in the Sept of Baelor, but obviously that was impossible now, so this would have to do.

It was a long, painful night and by morning her knees were sore and bloody, but she had done it and wore the wounds proudly.
She stood, painfully, as the High Septon approached. She welcomed his blessing. Then she tidied herself, and went to meet Bran and the council.

King Bran sat on his chair, in the place where the Iron Throne used to be. He was flanked by Tyrion, Bron and Davos. She glanced around the room, and found it intimidatingly crowded, with many faces she did not readily recognize. Her face went red, and she was acutely aware of her painful knees and unsteady walk.

She half-limped toward the king, and knelt at the foot of the throne.

When she had taken her place Bran began, in his strange but almost hypnotic monotone.

“Do you vow to protect the king from harm or threat, to willingly shed your blood in his defence and to give your life for his?”

"I swear it," she said.

“Do you vow to protect his family, his wife and children, true or natural, as you would the king?”

"I swear it.”

She wondered, passingly, if Bran could even have children. But it was of no matter. She would protect them if he did.

“Do you swear allegiance to the Small Council and the Hand, and vow to give effect to their orders and directions, so long as they do not conflict with those of the king ?”

I swear it.”

“Do you swear to all all times put the good of the king and kingdom above you own interests, and that of you family and your companions.”

"I swear it."  

"Do you forsake all lands and property while in service of the king, the council and the realm?"

"I swear it."  

“Do you swear to serve loyally and for life, unless discharged from your duties by order or courtesy of the king,”

At that, she paused. She had been unaware that a Kingsguard could be discharged. But the room was waiting, so she quietly said, "I swear it."

There was a pause, and then Bran spoke in a tone that was almost congratulatory.

“Then arise, Ser Brienne, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard to Bran the Broken, first of his name, King of the Andals and the First Men, Lord of the Six Kingdoms Protector of the Realm.”

She stood, dazed, and bowed deeply. She had been prepared for the laughter when she had to say the vow about fathering no children, but it never came. Nor, she noted with some amusement, did the vow about chastity, in relation to which she had been equally ready for the embarrassed shuffling. She looked up at Bran, wondering if there had been some mistake, but he was apparently already bored, staring out the window with those blank, impassive eyes.

She glanced at Sansa, and found her smiling as broadly as she had ever seen. Arya, beside her, was
grinning as well.

Brienne stepped down the dais, and away from the king, and the room erupted into applause.

After that, she spent an uncomfortable hour enduring congratulations and pats on the back, many from people she barely knew, or had previously been openly contemptuous of her. She hated politics.

Davos’ congratulations were genuine, and among the most welcome. The awkwardness was gone, maybe relieved by a strong drink. He clasped her on the shoulder enthusiastically. "How do you feel, my Lord?"

"Proud," she said. "But also exhausted. I'm getting to old for all-night vigils."

Davos laughed. Tyrion joined them, wine in each hand. He held one out to her, but she declined. Davos took it happily, although the look on his face said he'd rather have ale.

'I was surprised by the vows," she said in a slightly accusatory tone. "I had memorised others. The *usual* ones."

Davos grinned, teeth glinting through the grey of his beard. “Aye, you noticed that? The small council discussed them yesterday. King Bran has no interest in people making pointless promises they cannot keep. The chastity vow, in particular, has always been honoured more in the breach.”

She flushed, but said firmly. “I would have sworn them. You should have asked me." Tyriornorted. "And have you choose the most masochistic vows possible? My Lady, we got in before you were sworn for a reason. We want the best people this time, and not all of them are as righteous as you."

"You can always blame us for the change," Davos ensured her. "No one will think the worse of you for it. And there may yet come a time when you're even glad of it."

That afternoon, she knighted Pod.

Where her ceremony had been solemn and traditional, his resembled a drunken feast. To her irritation, the room was crowded, and people cheered. But when one wit offered his own commentary in response to the vow about protecting the innocent, even Brienne smiled. When she said "Arise, Ser Podrick," there were tears in her eyes.

He hugged her, and whispered in her ear, teasingly, "thanks, mum."

She did cry at that, open, happy tears, and for once she wasn't ashamed.

... The next morning, she gave a hungover and bleary-eyed Pod her other gift. *Widow's Wail.*

"It's yours”, she said, thrusting the beautifully carved blade in his direction. She was sure some other knight, someone more eloquent, would have had a meaningful speech to accompany the moment, but she trusted Pod would know what it meant.

When he Recognised the blade, his eyes almost fell out of his head.

"My lady, I couldn't..."
"You can, and you will."

He hesitated still, so she thrust it at him. "Oh, for the gods' sake, Pod, just take it."

"I..." He grabbed it, tentatively. "Thank you, my lady."

"That's Lord Commander, to you," she corrected, with a smile.

Pod shuffled his feet for a moment, and then looked up at her.

"Yes, about that. I ... um ... I heard that members of the kingsguard no longer have to be ... er..."

He seemed lost for words, and flushed red, quite an achievement given his duskier skintone.

"Chaste?" Brienne offered, with a grin.

"Yes, that." He bit his lip. "So, um, I was wondering...I mean, I think I've proved myself worthy, at Winterfell, and everywhere else, and both you and Lord Jaime said I was good..."

He stumbled a bit over Jaime's name, clearly hoping he hadn't made a mistake and ruined his chances, but Brienne merely smiled indulgently.

"Are you asking to be made the first member of the kingsguard, Ser Podrick?"

He stood up straight, and nodded. "Yes, Lord Commander."

"You understand the commitment? You have really thought about this?" She asked. "Jaime did say it was often little more than a glorified bodyguard. You are probably going to very bored."

"Boredom broken by period's of life endangering terror. Yes, I know, my lady. I am used to that, travelling with you." They both smiled at that. "But it's a position of honour, and responsibility. And I would be proud to continue to serve with you."

Brienne looked down and then back up at Pod, hoping her eyes reflected how proud she was of him.

"I cannot imagine a better right hand. I will speak with the King."

Later, she wrote to her father, setting out her achievements, and her appointment as Lord Commander. She did not know why, precisely, but she made a point of stating that the vows had changed, and that new members could marry and leave. A week later, her father sent his regards, and told her he couldn't be prouder. There was, she noted, no mention of her proposed new stepmother.

Moving into the Lord Commander's quarters was one of the more difficult things Brienne had done. White Tower was relatively unscathed, so it was mainly just a matter of sweeping away the dust rather than making major renovations. But these chambers had been Jaime's chambers, and even being in them provoked a certain pain. Jaime had been dismissed from the post two years before, by King Tommen, but his rumored replacement had been the silent - and reportedly dead - Ser Gregor. The monstrous creature did not appear to have lived in them at all, let alone redecorated. Pieces of Jaime's kingsguard armour remained on a stand in the sleeping chamber, and the curtains and bedspreads were a still rich Lannister red. She stared at the bed blankly, but
then remembered what he had told her. He always went to Cersei. She would live with things for now.

She found the rest of Jaime's belongings in a small cell in the main keep. His familiar red leather coat, some other items of clothing, a few spare items, an empty wine bottle. Not much to show for a lifetime of being the scion of Westeros' wealthiest family. In a drawer was a book where he had laboriously practiced writing in an unsteady, child-like hand, each letter repeated again and again. She sat on the bed and breathed him in. She would ensure what he had left went to Tyrion.

Then she went back upstairs and got to work.

With the queensguard dead to a man, she needed to start again. She also needed to honour them somehow. She admired their dedication their queen, even in the face of impossible odds. Balon Swann, she recalled, was a good man, although she had difficulty remembering any of the others. Kettleblack? Some bodies had been found, others not, each one killed by falling masonry or, at least according to Arya, Sandor Clegane. The Hound's death was another loss of life that made her heart clench a little. Despite their brutal first encounter they, too, had become uneasy friends. So much death. She needed to identify worthy candidates to refill the ranks. That would take time, and she would not rush if doing so would risk the reputation of the institution, as some of Cersei's appointments had done.

Then there were the Gold Cloaks. They had been manning the walls during the battle for kings landing, and their numbers were badly depleted. She went to meet their new captain, who was apparently a reappointment, having held the position sometime before, in his official quarters. The quarters were fine, but far more down to earth than hers.

The captain was silver haired man in his fifties, but not unattractive. Broad of shoulder. His hair would have been red in his youth. He held out his hand.

“Addam Marbrand,” He said.

“Brienne of Tarth,” She responded.

“It is good to meet you my Lady, or is it my Lord?” There was no mockery in his tone, just genuine interest.

“Lord Commander.”

“My own title,” he responded. “And quite a mouthful, but I will use it if you prefer. Yours is obviously superior to mine own.”

“Lord Brienne words just as well.”

She liked him Marbrand. He had charm and wit and a fierce intelligence. They would work together well.

He had, he explained, just returned from the Riverlands, where things were seriously out of control. “There are few places with a greater need for the king’s justice.”

She nodded. "That is where we will start then."

She spoke to Bran, and the council, and it was agreed that she would lead a contingent north to start cleaning up. Brienne intended to be active in pursuing the king’s protection. Ensuring he was popular and respected and powerful was, she thought, as important as guarding his back from assassins.
But before she left she had one final step to take.

Her new armour was ready. She removed Jaime's blue armor for the last time, and carefully placed it on a stand in her quarters. It was battered and worn, but she had kept it in good repair. It would always be precious to her. Then she called a young squire, and had him assist her to put on the new kingsguard armor. White, with crows inscribed on it. It was beautiful, and intimidating, and a symbol of a new start. She wore it with Oathkeeper, a reminder of her past.

She took herself into the Lord Commander's office, sat down, and pulled out the White Book. It was a bit singed, but had miraculously survived. *It is my duty to update it.* A duty she been both dreaming of and dreading. She opened it to Jaime's page. She remembered the longing in his voice, when he had shown it to her, in this room, so many years ago. "There's still time," he'd said, reflecting on the few sparse sentences about his own life. Well, that time had run out, but he had filled it well, and she would do him justice. He died protecting his queen, whom he loved, and he would have his legacy written by someone who loved him. She assured herself that if, standing in that room, on that day so many years ago, she had told him that would be his story, he would have been content.

When she finished, she closed the book. She stroked the cover gently, a final reminder of her regard for him. Then she left, for the Riverlands. She hoped, in years to come, her deeds would fill those pages too.

*Maybe,* she thought with a little mirth, *just maybe, they will even be recorded by Pod.*

**Chapter End Notes**

Addam Marbrand appeared very briefly in season 1, played by an actor who did not really match the book character. I have merged them a bit here, but mainly this is book Addam. A decent, competent man in the service of the Lannisters.
Jaime steered the cart slowly along the rutted trail that headed north from Rosby to Maidenpool. It was hardly the hive of activity it would have been in the years prior to the War of Five Kings, but even the moderate stream of travelers was sufficient to make the journey slow going. They were all smallfolk on foot, baskets or sacks of produce slung across their backs or loaded into hand-pulled carts. *They must have eaten their horses or oxes or lost them to bandits,* Jaime realised. Only occasionally did someone have livestock, and then usually just chickens in cages, excepting one scrawny goose and a pathetic old goat.

The smallfolk, too, were skinny and tired looking, their spindly legs and elbows visible through their rough spun garb. Jaime had once considered war the province of great families and their warrior hosts, but he'd since come understand that it was the smallfolk who bore most of its weight. *And this was one of the safer areas.* He could only imagine what some other places were like.

Cersei sat next to him on the narrow cart bench, wrapped in a cloak despite the relative warmth. Her face was tight and pinched, her skin pale, the whites of her eyes slightly yellow. He knew little of her condition, only that something inside her was poisoning her. "The corruption leaking to the surface", Arya had said. The maester had been more diplomatic, rabbiting on upon how her internal parts had been damaged in the collapse and were unable to clean her body of poisons. Jaime had struggled to comprehend the details. All that mattered was that she was dying, he was unable to stop it, he wasn't sure if he felt sorry about it, and he couldn’t even work out whether he should.

He didn’t know what he felt at all, other than bloody confused.

"Where are you taking us, Jaime?" Cersei asked, in a voice that suggested that she did not particularly care. She was in one of her rational phases. He almost welcomed the interruption to his increasingly dour thoughts.

="To show you your kingdom," Jaime answered. "Your former kingdom."

It wasn't a lie, just not the whole truth. He couldn't tell her where they were headed because he didn’t trust her not to disclose it during the course of one of her deliriums, or even to not deliberately announce it in the hope of being found. He didn't know how long their continued existence would remain a secret, and didn’t want their whereabouts known were someone trying to hunt them down - as no doubt many would if word got out they were alive.

She gave a short bark of laughter at his answer. "Why would you want to show me my kingdom? To gloat over what I have lost?"

He groaned inwardly. "Not at all. You were Queen of the Seven Kingdoms for, what, nearly a quarter century? In one form or another. But how much of those kingdoms have you actually
"Really? My recollection is that you spent most of those progresses in a carriage house with the curtains closed, playing cards and ignoring the world. Did you ever once actually meet one of your subjects?"

"I met them everyday. For the most part they were grovelling, simpering fools. They had to be washed if they worked in the Keep, but other than that I tried to avoid getting close enough to smell them."

Jaime ground his teeth at the response. She was impossible. He had spent nearly his entire life completely devoted to this woman. His twin, his mirror, his lover, the only person who truly knew him, the only woman, he had thought for so long, who would every truly want him. And yet, seated beside her in that carriage, he may as well be talking to a stranger. What had he loved about this cold, aloof, bitter woman, who hated everyone and everything around her. You always knew what she was, Tyrion had said. Had he? What did it say about him that he had loved her despite knowing what she was? That he was prepared to abandon a good, honorable woman, a woman who saw him and loved him and loved others too, and return to this one?

**Cersei wasn't always like this**, he reminded himself. **We weren't always like this.**

He looked down at her, and tried to remember who she used to be. A slender, golden-haired girl, with flashing green eyes, a devilish smile and a caustic, biting wit that could make even the greatest of lords shrivel in embarrassment or rage with lust. He could picture her in a long, red gown, rubies in her hair, laughing as she charmed the entire court on her debut in Kings Landing. *Everyone except Rhaeger, anyway.* His rejection of Cersei had deeply hurt her, but Jaime had always considered it a good thing. If Rhaegar had wanted her, he could have had her, and then Jaime would no longer be able to love his prince as he did.

"No doubt you have a ridiculous reason why you are doing this?" She sighed, pulling the blanket more closely around her as she interrupted his reminiscing. *Did he?* He hesitated before answering, and tried to think of what to say. What else could he do? As tempting as it was on occasion, he couldn't just leave her to die on the roadside. He couldn't leave her because she was his responsibility, until the bitter end. Because he would never forgive himself if she did. And because, *Gods be good,* he still loved her. *Or what is left of her.* Those parts of her that the blades of the Iron Throne hadn't sliced from her.

"Because I came back for you, dear sister. Because you are my responsibility, and I will not abandon you to die alone."

Again, it was a partial truth. She snorted, clearly not believing him. He hardly believed her anymore either. *When did we start lying to each other?*

After that they sat in silence, both watching a handful of smallfolk working fields of what appeared to be barely. It should have been a common sight, but was now so rare as to be notable. *These lands need help.* He could only hope whoever became the next king - maybe, hopefully *Snow* - made that a priority.

"I wish we were dead," Cersei announced dramatically. He snorted. On that at least, he almost agreed. "You'll get your wish soon enough."
"I should have taken the poison, when the walls fell. I always planned to."

"Even well laid plans go awry. Just ask me."

She shot him a contemptuous look. "Since when have you had a well laid plan?"

Evidently comparing his plans to hers was a form of sacrilege in her mind.

"I don't want to live like this. Scraping an existence in the dirt," she moaned again shortly.

"And you think I do?" Jaime asked in disbelief. "You brought us to this, Cersei. You and your ambition for power. We were the second richest family in Westeros, and you had to want to be the first."

"No brother, you were in line to be the second richest lord in Westeros. I was entitled to nothing, other than what father could get in exchange for my snatch. And he got the proceeds of that, too."

"You forget, I wasn't in line for anything, because you had convinced me to join the kingsguard. Father had disowned me. Tyrion was attainted - again, your doing. Casterly Rock was yours. You know I wouldn't have contested it. But Lady of Casterly Rock wasn't enough, was it? No, no. You had to keep being queen. You had no entitlement to the Iron Throne, and yet you seized it."

"Tommen was dead. Someone had to."

"Not. You." He ground the words out between clenched teeth. "You started a war, Cersei. A war in which hundreds of thousands died. Does that not worry you at all?"

She rolled her eyes. "You overstate our importance, Jaime. The war started long before that, long before Stannis started sniffing around our children, and it was going to continue no matter what we did. It was always Robert's War. He'd already tried to assassinate the dragon bitch, incompetently of course, because he was fucking useless, but he knew she was coming. At worst, we brought it forward, and eliminated some of her competition for her."

Her stared at her. "You're unbelievable."

"Don't forget, little brother, you were by my side the whole time, telling me how 'nothing else mattered'. If you cared so much about it, why didn't you try to stop me?"

_That's the question, isn't it? He thought. Why didn't I? Did I seriously believe what I told Olenna, what I told myself, that everything would be fine if she won?_

He couldn't answer that question.

"Don't you think I ask myself every day?" He answered instead.

Cersei gave a bitter bark of a laugh. "Oh, so you helped me do it, but you feel bad about it? So that makes you the better person?"

He ground his teeth. "I've changed. I'm not that man anymore."

"Really? Is that what _she_ tells you? Your big spotty cow? I suppose you're just waiting for me to die so you can go back to her?"

Jaime threw a glance at his sister, wondering how much she knew. Maybe nothing, maybe all of it. He shouldn't underestimate her resourcefulness or sources. No point being anything other than honest now, he supposed.
"She won't have me back," Jaime said simply. "I left her for you, and here we are."

"Yes, here we are," Cersei agreed bitterly.

Cersei was quiet for a minute, and in the silence between them the noise of the cart's wheels crushing the dirt and pebbles beneath it seemed almost deafening. Jaime wondered whether he preferred it when she was delirious and ranting.

Then, Cersei she asked curiously, "have you fucked her?"

Jaime snorted. "What?" With some effort, he kept his hand on the reins steady. "As you fucked Lancel? And Euron?"

Cersei merely rolled her eyes. "And the Kettlebacks too. Yes, brother, I fucked them all. I was working my way through my Queensguard."

He gave her another, longer look. Her face was a picture of fury. He couldn't work out if she was being truthful or just riling him. He didn't care.

"I didn't fuck Brienne," He said, honestly enough. "I didn't fuck her, not as Cersei understands the term. I made love to her."

He glanced at Cersei again. She appeared satisfied by the answer, giving herself a little self-satisfied smile. Of course, it wouldn't occur to her there was something other than just fucking. It had barely occured to me either.

He had only ever fucked Cersei. Hard, fast, the two of them striving to reach their peaks as quickly as possible, always a competition, the fear of discovery driving their passion. The urgency, the secrecy, the way she clutched at him and urged him to go faster, harder, quickly Jaime, quickly. It all added to the burn. Like lovers in a mummers show.

Being with Brienne had been a nothing like that. Free from fear and competition, they'd explored and enjoyed each other. The first few times had been awkward and clumsy and, to his mortification, brief, but after that it had been bonding and mutual and, yes, loving. It was never just fucking.

But they were private memories, something to cling to, to remember Brienne by, no matter what happened. He did not feel like explaining them to Cersei.

He added quietly, "I didn't fuck her, not like you think, but we were together."

"'Together'," Cersei laughed mockingly, "What as, comrades in arms? Tragic lovers? Gods you must have been desperate. Is it so cold up there you'd stick it in anything to stay warm?"

Jaime felt the fingers on his missing hand flex. The desire to slap her, yell at her, push her off the cart into the mud, was nearly overwhelming. But he resisted. He didn't hurt Cersei. That world had done that to her enough.

"You are not in a position to judge," he stated firmly.

She laughed again, clearly understanding what he meant. "You're still not over that? Lancel? You were gone a year, Jaime. A year!"

No, he wasn't over it. It still hurt. Gods, he didn't know why her fucking Lancel could still hurt. And Kettleback too, apparently, there was some lovely additional pain. What the bloody hell did
she see in him? He'd always known he could not have her exclusively. He’d accepted Robert. But somehow, that was duty. To have her take another man, for pleasure, while he was sitting in his own shit in Robb Stark's camp. It burned like betrayal. It was betrayal.

"A single year. You couldn’t wait a single bloody year? I would have waited a lifetime for you, Cersei."

"We're not all that self-sacrificing, Jaime." She sniffed dramatically. “I was lonely. I missed you.”

"Lonely," he snorted. "I was imprisoned! I was tortured. I sat in a cage, stewing in my own shit, with no one to talk to, and thought about nothing but you! I murdered two people to get back to you!"

She shrugged. "Maybe you didn't murder enough."

He gaped at her, speechless. Then he shook his head in exasperation. "What's the point? You will never understand."

"And nor will you."

He cursed, look back at the road and ground his teeth. "I don't want to fight with you, Cersei."

We never used to fight. Yet for the last couple of years that was all they had done. Fight, and fuck, and then he fled.

"I'm tired, Jaime," Cersei said, in a kind of agreement. It wasn’t an apology, but it was as close as she would ever get to one. She did look drawn, and the trembling was back. Drained, she crawled into the back of the cart, pulled the rough blanket over herself, and fell into a fitful sleep. He drove on, picking up the pace as evening approached and the trail emptied.

As the sun began its final descent, Jaime started looking for a place to spend the night. He had assumed they would find an inn, but every building they passed was in ruins. There wasn't so much as a farmstead that might offer a refuge for a few coppers. He began to feel nervous and unusually vulnerable. It was a new, unpleasant experience. Something the smallfolk must feel everyday. Or do they become immune to it? They trundled along a little further, the nervousness bubbling in his belly. Then he spied a small group gathered by the side of the road. A man who looked like a merchant, with a cart, and farmer and his woman. They eyed him warily as he pulled his cart over. The merchant's eyes, Jaime noticed, fixed on his sword.

"Well met," he said in greeting. He cringed as he said it, his flouncy Kings Landing accent obvious in only two syllables.

The farmer, Jaime noticed, had his hand on a hatchet. The woman stood slightly behind him, her face taught with fear. The merchant looked poised and ready to flee. These were cautious people, whose experience had taught them not to trust strangers. His first thought was to leave them be and press on, but if they were to rest for the night, and they must, lest he otherwise fall asleep at the reins, it would be better to do so in company than alone. These folks seemed relatively harmless, provided he kept his tongue in this mouth and his hand on his purse.

"If you are resting for the night, we would beg to join you," he said. "A larger group offers better protection."

"We?" asked the merchant.

In answer, Cersei emitted a low, and untimely, moan. All three raised their eyebrows and looked at
the cart.

“My wife is abed,” Jaime explained. *In another fever dream, and thank the Gods, therefore not likely to say something offensive.*

The farmer's wife approached the cart carefully. She was a frail looking woman in a much-patched dress, her nut-brown hair pulled back under a shawl.

"She's ill," she said, eyes narrowed, looking over the edge of the cart. Cersei stirred under the woman’s gaze, beginning to wake.

"Not contagious, I assure you," Jaime said smoothly, trying to enunciate a little less, and failing. "But we will stay well back if you wish. I'll take a turn at watch if it pleases you."

The farmer and merchant eyed each other, and the larger one, the merchant, nodded. "Aye, it pleases us to have another, if you be a good sort. Come eat a meal, and we shall see what we make of you."

They made some quick introductions. Erwin the merchant, bound for Maidenpool with what was almost certainly the looted belongings of dead Lannister soldiers, and Tam and Dorrie, farmers with actual honey. Jaime was salivating at the thought of honey, and almost considered using a little of his real gold to buy some, but that would look too suspicious. He introduced himself as James. It was as good a name as any, and slips by Cersei - Serise - could be easily explained.

Once they were encamped, Jaime gently helped a half-awake and muttering Cersei out of the cart and into the trees so she could relieve herself, then half-carried her back to the campsite. Necessity had forced Cersei to move past her embarrassment at having him assist her, although she still hated it, and it was much easier to do when she was *elsewhere*, like now. It was strange, how they had spent most of their lives having every need tended to by servants, without a second thought, yet could be shy about such things around each other.

*She'd never thought of the servants as real people, just noise. But was I any different?*

He hadn't been shy with Brienne, he remembered, even though he'd known her a much shorter time. Their relationship was forged in pain and indignity, yet he had never feared appearing weak around her as he did around Cersei. Brienne had cared for him when he was out of his mind with fever and in pain, when his stump was stinking and leaking puss, when he vomited up horse piss and when he'd soiled himself. They had started as enemies, and at that point still weren’t friends, but she'd never complained, never degraded him, never shown him anything but care, even as she helped him clean himself of his own mess. He remembered her large, calloused her, so gentle as she'd helped him...

*It was then that I began to love with her,* he thought. *Falling in love* with her might have come a little later.

Predictably, his thoughts immediately turned to those same large, calloused hands on other parts of his body. Tracing down his chest, nails raking across his nipples. Sliding through the hair at his groin, grasping his cock, squeezing along its length as she centred him and raised her legs about her on his back ... He felt himself begin to harden at the memory. *Not the time,* he told himself. He tried to shut his mind down, but failed.

*I left her.* He thought. *What the fuck is wrong with me that I still wanted Cersei when offered that?*

Cersei woke as he settled her back in the cart, "Jaime..." she questioned.
"Shh we're with company," he whispered. "I'll get you some food."

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat it anyway."

The ragtag little group was roasting a large hare over the fire. It smelled good. He didn't have meat to share, but Davos had provisioned the cart well, and he wandered over to find a loaf of bread that would be hard and stale by the next day if not eaten, and some cheese. He walked back and held it out as an offering to the others.

"The Stranger brings us food. It is a good night!" Erwin the merchant boomed.

"This should make it a meal," Jaime agreed.

The farmer's wife settled into cooking up their little feast as the men chatted about the journey, the roads, the state of Maidenpool and Kings Landing.

"We just came from there," Jaime admitted, tugging at the tough, stringy meat that clung to the hare.

"Aye, guessed as much, you got a lord's way of talkin', you have," observed Tam.

The farmer's eyes were small and dark, and Jaime got the impression that the man was smarter than he let on. It took courage to stand in a swarm of bees, and this one definitely had that. He couldn't know, Jaime assured himself. He probably thinks me a deserting soldier. Still, he carefully kept the stuffed glove on his right hand in his lap, out of sight.

"My father ensured I was educated, as did my wife's family did her. But there's nothing for us there now."

"I heard its dust and dirt. Dragon Queen burnt it all," said Erwin.

No doubt he’s seen it, salvaging on the battlefield.

"I heard it was good Queen Cersei what set it on fire to stop the dragon queen takin' it," corrected Dorrie. There was a glimmer of maliciousness in her eye that suggested she was not displeased by the turn of events. How they must hate the cityfolk with their walls and silks.

Jaime threw a look back at Cersei, where she sat huddled in the cart beneath the trees. She was watching, eyes glinting in the firelight. What does she think of these rumors, he wondered. Good Queen Cersei indeed.

"You're not far wrong. Whatever happened, the city is dust." Jaime tried to change the conversation. He looked around significantly, noting the empty road and haphazard campsite. "Looks like you've suffered your own troubles."

"Indeed," said the merchant."It's been tough times in these parts. The roads have been dangerous since the death of Good King Robert."

Good King Robert. For the second time, Jaime almost choked. What next, gentle King Aerys? Still, he supposed, to these people, Robert’s years were a time of plenty.

"What kind of dangers have you suffered?" He asked.

The merchant looked a little uneasy. Probably wondering whose side I was on in the war, careful
not to offend.

The farmer’s wife was less reticent, however. "’All of ’em,” she said. "twas wolves first, then lions, then ones with no crests or colours. They were the worst. Took our ol’ cow and mule and everythin’. Poor ol’ Milly..."

Jaime felt a flush of shame. He had sent men to the Riverlands around Riverrun, but not here. It had not occurred to him that bandits and mercenaries would be so bold but days from Kings Landing. It never occurred to me to ask. Not when he had other things to do. Like plot against his Uncle Kevan, undermine the Faith Militant, seize bloody Highgarden and squabble with fucking Euron over Cersei.

The conversation continued on for a time, until the fire grew low. Jaime went back to Cersei and lay down next to her to sleep. She moved closer to him, nearly snuggling. This was, he thought, only the second time he had actually slept beside her. I slept beside Brienne for four weeks. He'd woken up every morning beside her, sometimes even inside her. He remembered one particular memorable morning, roused from a delightfully erotic dream, to find her impossibly long legs wrapped around him, his cock already buried inside her. She'd rolled them over, pushed him back on the bed, and ridden him as the room gradually filled with light.

His breeches became uncomfortably tight, and he had to fight the urge to turn around and relieve himself with his hand in middle of a camp full off strangers. Instead he stood up, and told Tam to go to bed so he could take over the watch.

He was leaning against the tree, half dozing, desperately trying to think of something other than nights with Brienne, when the sound of approaching horses reached his ears.

Two horses, cantering. And men, speaking in a strange but distinctive language. Dothraki. Fuck.

Davos had said they were causing problems. A shiver of fear ran down his spine. He clambered over to Erwin and kicked him. "Up, up” he whispered.

"What?"

"Horses. Men."

He watched them emerge from the dark. Definitely two of them. Big fellows, both with impressive plaits. Fucking hells.

They pulled their horses up as they spied the carts, and spoke to each other in dothraki before turning to address Erwin, who as the best dressed they clearly assumed was the leader.

Okay, they haven't killed us outright. Could be worse.

"Food?" The bigger one said. "Gold?"

Gold? Jaime was almost amused. For a people who didn't believe in money, it hadn't taken them long to become obsessed with it. Welcome to Westeros.

Erwin glanced at Jaime, a question in his eyes.

"Give them what they want,” he advised firmly. The man nodded.
The farmer and his wife were struggling to their feet, bleary eyed. Cersei still lay in the cart. She was hidden by shadows, so it was possible they would not see her. Stay still, he thought toward her. Stay still as the dead, or we will all be among them.

"We have little, but we will give you what we have..." Erwin said placatingly to the riders, moving toward his cart.

Jaime also tried to meld into the shadows, but one of the dothraki, a big man with a black tattoo in his arm, fixed him with his dark glare, his eyes appraising. He had a bow in his hands, and Jaime raised his arms. The dothraki cocked his head on the side and looked at him skeptically.

He knows me, Jaime thought desperately. But then, no, he couldn't. Still, he should not have attracted his attention.

The other rider, the smaller one, guided his horse around the edge of the campsite, keeping Erwin in sight as he made his way to his cart. The farmers clutched each other, looking terrified. The smaller rider looked in Erwin’s cart, and used his arakh to move some of the goods around. He must have recognised the goods as battlefield plunder, but seemed largely uninterested. He looked to the other cart, and then to Jaime.

"Yours?"

"Yes," Jaime answered. "No gold, but I have food and silver..."

"Get. Bring."

Jaime nodded, and slowly inched toward the cart, thinking hard.

He supposed he could go on the attack, but taking on one mounted rider was rarely a good idea, and two was near suicide. Still, what other option was there? While the smaller rider could get a charge in, he had only an arakh, not a lance. Sharp as they were, the reach was no greater than a sword, so there was the possibility of surviving a charge, if he timed it just right, although even on the the best case scenario, where he avoided the blade, he’d probably still get trampled by the bloody horse. Better the horse than the blade. The archer was another problem. The dothraki were trained from near birth to use bows from horseback so he wouldn't miss. Jaime wondered passingly whether he could withstand an arrow. If he had to, if Cersei’s life depended on it, maybe...

"Get," the dothraki barked at him, gesturing to the cart, clearly wanting speed rather than dithering.

Jaime wasn't worried about the gold. It was secured in a small hidey-hole in the cart, and the dothraki wouldn't dismount and check. Even if they burned the cart, the gold would be there. The food and the silver, and maybe some of the other goods, would likely be the price of their lives.

He ground his teeth in humiliation and frustration. But a few years ago, he could have taken both these fuckers, and made a show of it. Now he was pathetically scrounging for silver to buy his life. Ser Jamie Lannister, Kingslayer, really did die under that Keep, he thought darkly.

He moved over to the cart and reached for the coins. As he did he saw Cersei, lying still in the tray, eyes wide and questioning. She was scared, but tried not to show it. For all her faults, his sister had never lacked for courage. He gave her an imperceptible nod, and reached in for the silver. Then he had an idea. He shuffled around, pretending to be looking for something, and in doing so shifted the tarp to show Cersei the small crossbow and quarrels and a knife. When they
were children, they had looked so alike that Cersei sometimes pretended to be him, and even trained with their weapon master. Surely she would remember how to load a crossbow? Please understand, he thought, shooting her a meaningful look.

Unfortunately, he took too long. Suspicious, the big dothraki guided his horse around the camp, closer to the cart. Jaime swore. If the rider saw her, he’d want her, and then all bets were off.

"Found it!" he said, pulling out a small bag and holding it up, putting on the toffiest accent he could. You have no dignity left, play the fool.

Let them underestimate you. That was what Brienne did, he remembered fondly. An image of her fighting those three Stark men outside an inn, while he watched in chains, flashed through his mind.

Really not the time. Concentrate, Jaime.

The big dothraki archer steered the horse toward the cart, and looked down. Even in the dark, Jaime could see the delight on his face when he saw Cersei there. His heart went cold.


But the dothraki appeared willing to risk a little disease.

"Bring woman," he said. He gestured in a way that clearly indicated Jaime was to retrieve her for him.

"No," Jaime said.

There was a low scream from behind him, followed by a wail. He turned to see the other, smaller dothraki hauling Dorrie onto his saddle, holding his arakh to her throat. Fuck, he’d forgotten all about her. Tam lay on the ground at his feet, clutching the bloody side of his head. His ear had been removed. Erwin was standing, white faced, in the space between them.

Jaime turned back to the archer. He had his bow drawn and an arrow pointed to Cersei.

"Get her," the rider grunted.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. This was bad.

He was going to have to trust Cersei had done as he asked. Gods, Cersei please be in your right mind, he thought desperately. Please have seen the crossbow.

Holding his hands up, he moved slowly around to the back of the cart, as if going to move and retrieve her. He was acutely aware of the sound of Tam's moaning and Dorrie's horrible weeping filling the air.

Cersei stirred as he approached. "Jaime, what's happening?" she whispered. Her eyes were wild and unfocused, as if she had just woken up.

She's acting, he told himself. She must know, surely this is a show.

He leaned into the cart and grabbed her, lifting her up.

"You need to get up Cersei," he said, loudly enough for the rider to hear.

"Bring," the dothraki repeated.
Cersei’s eyes turned to look at the rider. They widened as she saw first the man, and then the bow, and the arrow. Jaime reached his hand out, but to his astonishment, she brushed it aside.

"Bring?" she scoffed indignantly. She grabbed her skirt with one hand, and used the other to push herself into a standing position head high. “I am not his to be dragged and delivered!”

She put her hands on her hips, drew herself up to her full height, and glared directly at the horselord with defiant eyes. He started, clearly surprised by the boldness of the woman in the cart, although his eyes immediately darkened into lust, intrigued by it.

"I am Cersei Lannister, Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. I will not be carried to you. If you want me, come and get me."

The declaration, coming from a skinny woman in a roughspun dress, was hilarious, and the big dothraki thought so too. He stared incredulously at Cersei, and then threw his head back and laughed.

It was all the distraction Jaime needed. Trusting Cersei had done what was asked of her - what other choice did he have? - he lunged for the crossbow, lifted it, and fired.

The Gods must have favoured them. He had been aiming for the horse, the largest target, but the beast moved slightly, and the bolt miraculously bit deep into the side of the rider. The dothraki’s laugh became a cry of outrage and pain. He released the bow, the arrow flying wide and disappearing into the dark.

Cersei dove out of the cart and underneath it.

The fight was on.

The other dothraki threw the farmer's wife out of the way, and charged him. Jaime had only seconds to act. He drew his sword, clumsily, barely retrieving it as the rider bore down on him. He stood his ground, then at the last moment, he stepped to the rider's right, and swung his sword at the horse's legs. It connected with the meaty area at the top of the horses' shoulder, but it was enough. The horse collapsed and rolled, the rider on top of him. The dothraki was quick and graceful, rolling out of the saddle, but Jaime was too close to miss. He wasted no time in plunging the blade through his opponent’s back. The horse let out a horrified squeal, and he jumped out of its way as it writhed and tried to stand.

The other rider was back in control of his horse, and still holding the bloody bow, now fitted with another arrow. He fired, but his hands were shaking in pain, and the only adequately fired arrow missed, kicked aside by the horses’s flailing legs. Jaime could see a dark stain running down the archer’s horse's pale coat. Bleeding badly, good. The rider steered his horse with his knees, eyes fixed on Jaime, skirting the outskirts of the camp, trying to find an angle for a good shot.

Jaime tried to steady his breathing and think. He dared not risk another open attack - surviving one charging horseman was miracle enough. His bloody leg prevented him from covering distance with any speed. His best option was keep space and cover, wait for an opportunity. Unfortunately the dothraki would likely do the same.

Vaguely, he remembered the others travellers. Dorrie was sobbing, Tam moaning. He couldn't afford to look at them. "Get down, find cover" he commanded them, hoping they would not make themselves targets. That was the best he could do for them.

He skirted back around the cart, and shifted the blade in his hand. It was heavy in comparison to
Widow's Wail, and he knew he was clumsy with it. His head was ringing from the adrenaline and his arm shook. *I am too old for this.*

He met the dothraki’s cold eyes and flashed what he hoped was an intimidating grin, spinning the blade in his hand. The rider returned a wide, malicious smile. As he did, a glimmer of recognition broke across his face.

"Kingslayer!" He announced, triumphantly.

*Fucking hell.* He’d been recognised. Well, now this one had to die.

Unfortunately, at this rate, with him hiding behind cover and the dothraki waiting for an opportunity, that death was as like to be from old age as anything else.

Then, to Jaime's horror, Cersei suddenly emerged from beneath the cart, and bolted for the trees, throwing something as she did. The dothraki turned his attention to her for only a second, but that was all he needed. Ignoring the pain and stiffness in his legs, Jaime dove toward his foe. The dothraki's gaze snapped back to him, and he loosed the arrow, but Jaime felt it fly past his shoulder, grazing him but not connecting. He covered the few feet, albeit much more slowly than he would have liked, and, putting all his strength behind the blade - left hand around it and stump on top - he plunged the blade into the horse's chest. Blood spurted, covering him, and the animal screamed and fell to its knees.

Widow's Wail would have sliced through the meat and come cleanly out the other side. This blade stuck. The dothraki leapt from the horse, kicking Jaime as he did so. He fell a few steps backwards, but the combined force of his weight and the kick helped him to dislodge the sword. The dothraki advanced on foot, arakh gleaming in the moonlight, and Jaime barely managed to block a swing. He was not the warrior he used to be, and rarely had that been more obvious to him than now. But the rider was underestimating him too. He thought again of Brienne's strategy. *Let them come at you. Let them underestimate you. Let him bleed out from the stomach wound.*

*But that only works when you have Brienne’s endurance.* He didn’t. He concentrated on defending himself, staying alive. Waiting for the opportunity.

He found it. To his surprise, Erwin approached the dothraki from behind. The merchant was no warrior, and the dothraki was aware of him, but the need to protect his flank from even an inept attack resulted in a careless swing that opened his front. Jaime thrust his blade into the rider's wounded stomach. The dothraki groaned, and instinctively bent over in pain, dropping his guard further.

Jaime thrust again, this time disemboweling him.

The dothraki fell to the ground, hands clutching at his falling intestines, groaning as he died.

Jaime collapsed to his knees before him, gasping for breath, feeling not far from death himself.

"Jaime!" Cersei screamed, and limped over to him. She put her arms around him, despite the blood covering him, and for a long moment, he collapsed into her familiar embrace.

“That was brave, Cersei,” he said admiringly.

She smiled weakly. “I’m no prize to be delivered on a platter to a flea infested savage.”

Despite everything, she looked beautiful in that moment. *This is what we used to have,* he thought warmly.
Then the sound of Dorrie and Tam and the injured horse registered in his mind. He gently removed her arms from him, and staggered over to finish off the larger rider's distressed mount.

The smaller rider's horse was bleeding badly from the deep gouge in its leg, but it might live if infection didn't set in.

A few feet away, Erwin was shaking like a leaf. By the look and smell of him, he had emptied both bladder, bowels and his stomach. Jaime gave him a respectful nod. Charging at the dothraki like that was brave. He noticed Erwin was holding the knife from the cart. Cersei must have given it to him, he thought, feeling even prouder of his sister as well.

“Thanks,” he said to the merchant, genuinely meaning it. But Erwin merely stared at him in blank horror.

Tam was holding the side of his face, as pale as snow, leaning on Dorrie, who held him upright. They were alive. He'd saved them. And yet, they did not look relieved. Their faces were pictures of fear, also staring at him in wide-eyed terror.

"He called you kingslayer!" the merchant gasped.

Jaime felt his stomach drop like a lead weight. Of course they heard that. Kingslayer. Oathbreaker. It always came back to fucking Aerys. He had just protected them from a dothraki attack, and yet it was he who they feared. Bloody, fucking Aerys.

He flung his head back and glared up at the sky for a moment. Would this one good act haunt him for ever? He wanted to scream at the unfairness of it all. He wanted to hit something until his hands bled. He wanted beat into the heads of every person in the world that he had saved a half a million people.

But all he did was clench his fists and get control of himself, before turning his gaze back to the terrified smallfolk before him.

The farming couple were on their knees.

"I'm sorry, m'lord, I knew not."

"I did not know m’lord."

"I'll never tell, m'lord. Who'd believe us..."

And then it dawned on him. They think I will kill them because they know who I am.

He looked to Cersei, as she slowly walked toward him through the ruins of the campsite, weak but regal, her dress stained with the horse blood that coated him. Her eyes were blazing, manic, almost lusty, and she shifted her gaze to the farmers. She clearly thought he should do just that.

"Kill them", she whispered, as she approached him. "They recognised you, you can't let them talk!"

Unbidden, he remembered his journey with Brienne, in the forest, the farmer who had seen them, who he feared had recognised him. Hadn't he insisted Brienne kill the man? She’d declined. Then he went and told the bloody mummers about us. He’d almost enjoyed telling her he was right. Until he lost his hand and she was nearly raped. Cersei was right. He couldn’t take that risk.

He felt his hand tighten on his blade. He watched as the farmer stood before his wife, ready to
protect her and give her a chance to flee. Erwin looked ready to run, too. Jaime considered how best to get them all, plans flashing through his mind. He felt the bloodlust, the panic, the overwhelming desire to protect Cersei.

He fought it down, lowered the hand.

"No. Not today."

Cersei hissed. “What? Don’t be a fool!”

He flashed his three companions a smile, well aware that, given he was covered in blood and standing next to the corpse of someone he had just disembowelled, it probably looked more sinister than reassuring.

"Do I looked like a knight to you? The fool mistook me for the Kingslayer. It's the missing right hand. A common mistake."

They looked at him uncertainly, but nodded. They didn't believe him. The carnage around him didn't help.

"Jaime, smallfolk can’t be trusted! They are going to tell someone!” Cersei warned again, grabbing his arm. “This is no time to be sentimental.”

He shrugged her off.

He looked at the farmers, and nodded to the horse. "It's a good beast, you'll get a pretty price for it if it is survives."

*Take it, payment to keep quiet.* They just continued to stare at him blankly.

Erwin, however, gathered his wits. “Thank you,” he said, “James and Serise. We owe you our lives.”

Jaime nodded in acknowledgement.

"We have to go," he said firmly to Cersei, taking her hand. "Now!"

“Soft idiot,” she swore under her breath, “I should do it myself...”.

Jaime snorted contemptuously. “You can hardly poison them, and we’re a little short of wildfire to blow them up.”

"I told you, the sept was a tragic accident."

"I don’t believe you."

Cersei had little choice but to follow him onto the cart. He had to help her up. She was weak and shaking.

He retrieved their hobbled horse, affixed him to the cart, and then climbed onto the bench. A flick of his wrist, and the cart started its journey north.

He left the smallfolk staring after him. They were safe, or as safe as they could be in these times.

If he had ever been the kind of man who would have done something else, he was not that man anymore.
ARYA

King's Landing

Arya stood outside Gendry's pavilion, lazily tracing circles in the dirt with her foot. She'd been doing it for at least ten minutes, and not a single guard had so much as asked her what she was doing. Either everyone knew who she was and was avoiding her, or Gendry's security was singularly appalling.

Sighing, she looked at the tent flap. Waiting wasn't going to make this any easier. She braced herself, and slipped inside.

Gendry was sitting at a desk, quill in hands, eyes narrowed as he peered at a scroll. He looked both uncomfortable and oddly adorable.

"Hello, Gendry," Arya said, softly.

He looked up, and started. His hand jerked, and a blot of ink fell from the quill onto the parchment.

"M'lady", he stammered, standing. "Arya."

He stood up so quickly that the chair he had been sitting on tilted dangerously behind him, hitting a small table holding a silver carafe of wine, and toppling that too. Everything fell to the floor with a crash. They both stared at the mess.

Some seconds later, a guard rushed into the tent, his attention, finally, drawn by the noise. "Sir?"

Arya smirked. Now they pay attention?

Gendry shuffled, and turned to pick up the chair. "Um...yes, all good, Calister. Fine. Please, leave us." He stuttered.

Arya couldn't be sure, but the guard appeared to smirk at her as he turned to leave. She raised an eyebrow at him. Gendry did seem to inspire a kind of protective affection in just about everyone. It was sweet, but he was going to have to get tougher if he was to be a lord, starting with disciplining his clearly incompetent men.

'You need better guards. Had I been an assassin, you'd be dead."

"You are an assassin."

"Lucky for you, I'm off duty."

Gendry pushed the now upright chair beneath the desk, then stood up and looked at her. His expression was hard to read, but there was definitely hesitation there, and hurt. She returned the appraisal. He looked good. Handsome and lordly, if overwhelmed.

"The fancy digs become you, m'lord," she smirked.

Arya walked slowly around the pavilion, taking stock of the rich furnishings. The chairs, the desk, the stand for his armour, the weapon rack, the obviously feather bed. Now that stirred some memories. She glanced from the bed to Gendry. He instantly flushed red, and she couldn't help but smile.

"I didn't want to leave things ... you know, strange, between us," she said, slowly.

"It's a bit late for that."

"Is it?"

"You've ignored me for months."

Gendry pushed himself off the table to stand upright. She couldn't help but notice how the muscles bulged under his shirt. No doubt, he could tell she was watching. He appeared to be posing. She looked away and smiled.

"My offer is still open, if you've reconsidered," he said, gently. She could see the hope in his eyes.

"Gendry..."

He shook his head, and she could sense the heartache rising in him again. "Of course you haven't. Are you here to further humiliate me?"

"No, of course not." Arya sighed, and turned to face him. She didn't want to humiliate him. This feelings shit is so fucking difficult. She should have talked to Sansa, except that would be humiliating to her.

She came here to be honest with Gendry, and that's what she would be.

"I'm leaving Westeros, Gendry. I have a ship, with a crew, and we're sailing west, to see what lies beyond the Sunset Sea."

He stared at her. She may as well have told him she was intending to explore the bottom of a volcano. "I..." he stuttered.

"It's been my dream, for so long, to explore the world. I have to do this, Gendry. I'll regret it if I don't."

He nodded, slowly. "You were always adventurous." He swallowed. "Will you ever be back?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Hopefully. After all, her family was here, and the lone wolf dies. "But possibly not for some years."

He must have seen something in her face, or heard it in her voice, as he began to walk toward her, cautiously. Nervously. "I'll ... I'll wait for you."

She shook her head. "You can't, Gendry. You're a lord now, lord of Storm's End. You have duties and responsibilities, and you need a lady to run your castle, birth your heirs."

"I have a lady," he said firmly, meeting her eyes. "Not a normal one, but the only one I want."

He reached out tentatively, and laid his large hand on her arm. "Um...that's you, in case you didn't know," he clarified quickly.

She laughed. "Gendry...I may not make it back. I may die. I may decide to stay in the West. So
many things may happen, and you can't just sit here, like some damsel in a tower, and wait for my return. That's, well, stupid, frankly."

He raised his other hand to her other arm, holding her before him. "Four years," he said, suddenly. "What?"

"I'll wait four years. That's what I'll tell Davos and all the annoying lords and ladies and the council. Four years for Arya Stark to return to me. They know you. They'll understand. Then you don't need to worry that I'll pine away in a tower. I'll let them make a marriage for me with some ugly Dornish princess or something. And if you really don't want me, you only have to stay away that long to be free of me and my awful marriage proposals."

"Gendry..."

"Arya, please..." He gazed at her with his huge blue eyes.

She smiled, and looked down at her feet and then back up again. "You are so strange."

"Is that a yes?"

She nodded. And, before she could say anything more, he leaned forward and kissed her. She stood frozen unmoving for a moment, but only for a moment. Then she opened her mouth beneath his, and kissed him back passionately. She pressed herself against him, and he easily lifted her off her feet. She wrapped her legs around him.

She broke the kiss, and looked over her shoulder to the bed. "How likely are your guards to pay attention if you start groaning?" she asked mischievously, her hands reaching for the laces at the neck of his shirt.

"You've seen how lazy they are," he replied. "We are very unlikely to be interrupted unless I scream."

She grinned, working his shirt up, past her legs and over his chest, revealing his toned shoulders. _Gods, he's handsome._

"I can't guarantee that won't happen. We've got about four years worth of memories to make."

He pushed her back toward to bed.

"Well, m'lady, let's get started."

...  

JAIME  

The Bay of Crabs

The path of faith, they called it. A marshy track across mudflats to the island known as the Quiet Isle. Legend had it the wicked would be drowned by quicksand. _If the legends are true, both Cersei and I would be sunk in seconds._ But it was also an island of penitents, and in order to do penance, one must have sinned. _Although perhaps not as egregiously as we._

Whatever the truth of the myth, no doubt that the island was surrounded by quicksand and
sinkholes, and penitent or not, Jaime wasn't going to risk walking it, at night, with a lame leg, and carrying Cersei. Instead, he parked the cart under a tree and climbed down. He hobbled the horse, giving it a quick pat, and then walked to the back of the cart and checked on his sister. Even in the moonlight, he could see that her skin had taken on a disturbingly yellow pallor. She'd had difficulty keeping down what little food she ate earlier that day, and she looked like she might break if touched. She'd spent most of the last two days in and out of sleep, muttering and cursing. The poison was growing in her, and her efforts with the dothraki, although brave, had cost her dearly.

There was a growing chill in the air, so Jaime pulled off his jacket and threw it over her too. The wind nipped at him through his light shirt, but he ignored it. If this worked, they would be warm soon enough. He scouted the banks of the bay and found some relatively dry timber, then painfully squatted down and used his flint and tinder to light a small fire. He then went back to the cart and gently woke his sister.

"Come and get warm," he whispered.

She moaned, and muttered something that sounded like "fuck off," but he managed to get her up and out of the cart and over to the fire.

"What are you doing?" she asked quietly.

"Attracting attention," he answered. "They should be here in a little while."

He went back to the mudflats and filled his waterskin, and then helped Cersei to clean herself up with water and a rag. He gently wiped her stained face. She peered at him with an undefinable expression.

"Why are you doing this, if you do not love me anymore," she asked weakly.

"I do love you, sister, or I would not be doing this," he replied gently. "I don't make a habit of playing nursemaid to people I don't love."

_Brienne played nursemaid to me, before she loved me_, he thought. And there, at the memory of her, was that sense of loss and longing again. Great.

Cersei scoffed. "If you still love me, you are a fool."

He shrugged. "Probably. I think Tyrion's words were 'fucking idiot.' And you always did say I was the stupidest Lannister."

He surveyed the area again, and then sat down next to Cersei and pulled her too him. She was stiff and cold, and she leaned against his chest, sharing his warmth.

"I wish we had all just stayed at Casterly Rock," he said. "You, me, Tyrion. Mother, ideally, but I know that's not possible. Even father. We were happy there, before all the politics, and the wars. Before we were separated. All I really wanted was for all of us to be together."

"You're delusional," Cersei scoffed. "We would have killed each other, Tyrion and I. And you would have spent your days wearing down the battlements, dreaming of being a knight, while I stared out a window and imagined being a queen, and father plotted from his study. We were all destined for greatness, Jaime. It's who we are."

"And yet look at us now."

"Yes, look at us."
There was something self-satisfied in her voice. He looked down at her and saw she was smiling. 

"You can't possibly think this was all worth it?" he asked incredulously.

"I was the first queen to sit the Iron Throne in her own right. No one can take that away from me, Jaime. So perhaps it was."

He felt ill. Their father, their children, the people of Kings Landing, the countless multitudes starving across the country. All so Cersei could be the first queen in her own right. And yet here he was, sitting by the fire with her, holding her close.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

He sat quietly, and watched the water begin to slowly cover the mudflats, hiding the brown muck under the ripples. If only other kinds of filth could be so easily hidden.

Cersei had drifted off the sleep again, so he set her down and stood to tend the fire. As he did so, he noticed a slight light had appeared on the bay. He made his way to the waters edge and waited.

The boat contained three men, all dressed in a septon's bare brown robes, with wide bell sleeves and pointed cowls. Two of them had lengths of wool around their mouths. The silent brothers, he recalled. The third, the shortest and broadest, wore no such gag.

They stepped out of the boat, and looked at Jaime curiously.

"Greetings and well met," said the lead man. He had a hint of a Stormlands accent. Must everything remind me of Brienne?

Jaime inclined his head in greeting. "I have come to see the Elder Brother. Tell him, Ser Jaime has come to the Quiet Isle."

"You can tell him, we will bring you to him."

"Thank you." Jaime said He turned, and headed back to collect Cersei, lifting her as best he could.

"A woman," the septon said, stating the obvious.

"Yes. She is ill, and seeks respite."

The man nodded. "Come then, the Elder Brother has been expecting guests."

Jaime looked back at the horse, and noted that one of the gagged men had taken the animal by the reins.

"Brother Jared will take care of your animals and possessions," the lead septon said. He nodded.

Cersei woke as Jaime helped her into the boat, and he was glad of it. She weighed next to nothing, but even that was painful to carry any distance with his damaged legs.

The two brothers who remained with them rowed the boat against the current, guiding it to a dock on a rocky outcrop on the isle. They climbed off the boat, and held it while Jaime helped Cersei out. The two of them struggled across the rough ground, only to find themselves at the foot of a wooden flight of stairs that wound its way up and up the hills.

"This only gets worse," Cersei muttered.
Jaime leaned over and wrapped her arm around his shoulder, and his around her waist. "It will be worth it, they can care for you here, Cersei."

She made a disbelieving sound, but started to walk with him. She seemed well enough, at present, if a little delirious. He took most of her weight, and was panting when they reached the peak of the hill, and the collection of un-mortered stone buildings atop it.

Another brother, his lower face also wrapped in wool, emerged from one of the houses carrying two cups of something hot. Jaime accepted his, but Cersei started to decline. "Hold it in your hands and get warm," the lead septon said to her. His voice was soft but commanding and, surprisingly, Cersei took his advice.

A few more minutes passed, and then the Elder Brother came to meet them, as Jaime had expected.

He had known the man, or who he used to be, many years ago, when they both had different lives. Two dead men, meeting in a place of the Gods. The Elder Brother looked much older than Jaime remembered, but no doubt he did too. He was still robust, looking every inch the fighting knight and in obviously better shape than Jaime. He is still fit and whole, where I am a cripple. Handless, lame, and possibly mad.

The Elder Brother nodded to him in welcome. His eyes were curious, but not unkind. Not displeased to see me, so much as intrigued and surprised.

"This island is for those seeking repentance, Ser Jaime," the Elder Brother said, as he approached.

"Yes," said Jaime. "I am aware of that."

That is why we are here.

Then Jaime realised that the Elder Brother's eyes were fixed not on him, but on Cersei. He felt her stiffen beside him.

"She would if she could," he explained hastily. But even as the words left his mouth, he knew they were wrong. No she wouldn't.

Even Cersei laughed, weakly, little more than a gasp. "My brother thinks I am sorry for what I have done. I am merely sorry that my success did not endure longer."

"My lady," The Elder Brother acknowledged her, and fixed her with a steady gaze. "You seek healing, not penance."

"I seek death, priest. I am not long for this world. Do not pity me. I am tired of my brother's sad eyes and wasted tears."

The Elder Brother's voice was almost amused. "You say that, and yet you fight for life with every breath."

Cersei’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

Jaime quickly stepped in. He should have known that Cersei would fuck up even this. He raised his hand, pleading, "Brother, we’ve traveled for days. We have nowhere to go. At least let us stay and rest."

"There is little we can do for one such as her..." But his eyes looked from Jaime to Cersei, and back, and his demeanor softened. "Very well. We do not turn away those in need." He beckoned
for them to follow. "Are you hungry?"

Jaime shook his head. "No, we have eaten. But my sister needs rest."

The Elder Brother led them along the path, until it reached a fork.

"Unmarried men and women do not sleep under the same roof on this island," the Elder Brother announced as they paused at the break in the path. "Even siblings. We have well kept cottages for women, clean and warm, but not here."

"That will please my brother. I cannot take advantage of him." Cersei said mockingly.

The Elder Brother gave them both a sharp look, and Jaime wondered whether the rumours - the knowledge, really - of what he and Cersei had been to each other had reached even here. But if the Elder Brother knew what Cersei spoke of, he paid it no mind.

"That is the point, yes," he said tonelessly. "We can make no exceptions."

Jaime felt concern rise in his chest. "Please, neither of us are like to offend your Gods, I should watch over her..."

The Elder Brother shook his head firmly. "The silent sisters will watch over her. She will be well cared for."

"No!" Cersei began, and Jaime could hear the panic in her voice. Of course, the septa, the Faith Militant, she would not agree to be alone with a septa.

But the Elder Brother's voice was firm and calm. "You will find that our sisters are not as you have experienced before, my lady," he said. He met her eyes, and Jaime could see Cersei begin to relax, almost as if the Elder Brother wielded some kind of magic. "They are healers, and compassionate. Please, My Lady. The only alternative is that you return to your boat."

Cersei was in no position to object, but, to Jaime's surprise, she acquiesced willingly enough anyway. There was something about this isle that was calming even for one such as she. Jaime stood and watched as two septas helped her along the rocky path. Despite everything, he still worried about her, constantly. *I do not want her to die,* he thought. *I will weep, and grieve, even as every other person cheers her demise.*

He looked back around, and saw the Elder Brother watching him contemplatively. *He knows. He knows what we once meant to each other, if not what we still mean to each other.*

"Come, Ser Jaime. I'll show you to your quarters." The Elder Brother took his arm, and led him slowly along a path to the guest chambers at the back of the island.

They walked silently for a few moments, Jaime lost in thought.

"You have long a long way, Ser Jaime," the Elder Brother said finally, breaking the silence.

"Not nearly as far as you, I think."

"Perhaps, but you did not have near as far to go."

Jaime snorted "I'm not sure about that. My sins are as dark as yours, and the consequences have certainly been greater."

"It is impossible to rank such things, my old friend."
"If only that were true."

The Elder Brother turned his head to look at him again. "You have come seeking redemption, then?"

Had he? Jaime honestly didn't know. Perhaps that is what he wanted as he rode to Winterfell. Perhaps he had hoped to find it in Brienne’s arms. Redemption, honour. Or maybe just wanted Brienne. *Certainly, her as much as anything else.* But he had never deserved her, anymore than he had redemption. He had just taken from her, her love, her faith, her protection, her honour, even her virginity. And then he had panicked, and left.

Riding to Kings Landing, the sound of Brienne's tears between his ears, he had convinced himself that he had left his only chance at redemption in the dust at her feet. That he would die a hateful man, in arms of his hateful sister, forever reviled as an oathbreaker and a kingslayer, and no one, hopefully not even Brienne, would mourn him.

But apparently near death experiences bring clarity. Standing with the Elder Brother, in this calming place, he can't believe he ever wanted that, or that he was even prepared to accept it.

*But what could I have done differently?* Could he have left Cersei to her fate? No, not when he thought she was pregnant, certainly, and probably not at all. Definitely not at all. He could not have lived with himself. *But I could have been honest with Brienne,* came the unasked for answer. *I shouldn’t have been a coward, shouldn’t have tried to sneak off in the night. I shouldn’t have panicked when she caught me.*

*I should have told her I loved her. Told her the truth.*

*And I shouldn’t have hung onto stupid ideas about changing Cersei.* Tyrion and he were both guilty of that, and both had paid the price.

"I think I hoped to redeem Cersei," he said. "Her sins are greatest of all. But I know now that is impossible."

"She has sinned most terribly. And yet you have loved her? You still love her?"

"Yes," he answered. "I knew what she was, and I loved her."

"You believe that if she can change, that love, and all you sacrificed for it, will be justified? That, somehow, her redemption will prove that you are a good man."

Jaime opened his mouth to answer, but couldn't find the words. Eventually, he just nodded.

The Elder Brother pushed open a cell door, and beckoned Jaime inside. It was a small cell, plainly furnished, but warm from a lit brazier.

"You knew I was coming?" Jaime asked.

The Elder Brother smiled. "Yes. Please, make yourself comfortable."

Jaime made his way to the bed, and sat down, suddenly bone-weary. The Elder Brother glanced at the simple stool in the room, and Jaime nodded his agreement to the man taking a seat on it.

The Elder Brother sat, hands on knees, looking at Jaime, waiting.

"I don't know what I want to do," Jaime said quietly.
The Elder Brother looked at him with what looked like compassion. Jaime hated sympathy. He felt his insides squirm.

"You are headed in the wrong direction, Jaime," the Elder Brother said, finally.

He looked up, startled. "What?"

"You do not need to seek redemption for your failure to care for your sister, or your failure to save her. It is not her who you have failed, other than perhaps, through your devotion to her, enabling her."

He shook his head vigorously. "Cersei is my penance."

But the Elder Brother fixed him with a long stare. "No, caring for Cersei cannot be your penance. It is too easy."

Jaime felt the anger rise in his chest. "Easy? It's fucking terrible."

"It is easy because you have done it all your life, at the expense of everything else. This, this that you are doing now, is a continuation of that. Forgive me, Jaime, but you're just feeding that self-indulgent, self-pity."

Jaime clenched his left hand, felt the urge to punch the man. "You have no idea what you're talking about," he spat.

"Don't I? I know a thing or two about redemption, Ser Jaime. That is what you want, isn't it? To not be that man anymore? The man who starts brawls in the street, murders his cousin, and threatens to trebuchet a baby?"

"How do you know about that? I would never have actually..."

The Elder Brother ignored his question.

"You can't just declare that you want to be a better man, Jaime. You have to live it, change. You've spent most of your life devoted to one person, and you've let that devotion blind you to everything else, everyone else. Your redemption will not be found through continuing to do that. It won't be found by blindly following someone else, either, no matter how worthy she is, or how much you love her. Brienne of Tarth is no more your redemption than Cersei. You need to find it through caring for others, making right your wrongs, and those of others. You need to find it out there..." he indicated beyond the island, “and here..." he pointed to Jaime's heart. "You want to be a good man? Become one."

He closed his eyes, and nodded. But how?

"Touching. But I don't know how," he said desperately. "Isn't this where you come for answers?"

"Only if you ask the right questions."

"What the fuck do you want me to ask you?"

"It's what you need to ask yourself, Ser Jaime."

The Elder Brother sighed, and stood up from the chair. "We do not turn away those in need. You may rest here, until Cersei passes, and we will make that as comfortable for her as we can. But then you must leave. You need to find your own path."
The Elder Brother headed toward the door.

"You may visit your sister on the morrow. Stay away until then, and think on what I have said."

Then he stepped through the door, and closed it behind him. He was gone.

Jaime stared at the door for a long time, and then he lay back, and lost himself in thought.

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**Davos**

**The Red Keep - Kings Landing**

"So, let me understand this. You dug my family out of the tower, alive, cared for them, put them on a cart to Duskendale, and lost them."

Tyrion's voice was raised in a combination of astonishment and outrage.

"That's about the sum of it, yes," admitted Davos. "They were meant to board a ship to Pentos, but never got on it."

Tyrion took a sip of his wine and a very deep breath. "It may take me some time to digest this information. Does anyone else know?"

"Other than Arya? No."

"Not Brienne?"

"No." Davos paused. "We decided not to tell her. We decided not to tell you, either, until after your trial, and then until after we could confirm Jaime at least was safe. But, er, we can't do that, so I'm tellin' you now. I hate secrets."

He sighed deeply, and collapsed into one of the small council chairs. "Wouldn't his Grace know? Doesn't he know everything?"

Tyrion shook his head. "He won't tell us, not unless he thinks we need to know, but I'll ask.” He sat back down on the chair and poured another wine. "Well, this is ... a fine mess."

"Aye. No good deed goes unpunished. Should we tell the Lord Commander, before the rumors reach her ears from another source?"

Tyrion sighed. "Yes, but not now. She's in the Riverlands, and this is not the sort of news that should go by raven."

"Agreed. And what should I do in the meantime?"

"Send some men to Rosby and Maidenpool to investigate. If my brother and 'good Queen Cersei'..." Tyrion could barely say the words without retching, "...really are on a crusade to save the people of the Crownlands from bandits, they shouldn't be too hard to find."

Davos nodded. "And that goes as much for us as for someone who actually wants to finish what
that bloody tower started."
Release

Chapter Notes

A lot happens in this chapter. As this is show canon, I stuck with Locke, not the Goat, although I drew a bit on the books (and use the Vargo Hoat's voice, because it is too funny). I've also tried to make the battle feel TVish, but I fear it is still more Dragon Age than GoT. Apologies if you find it too silly!

Next chapter should get lighter :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

BRIENNE

The banks of the God’s Eye

The first flowers of spring, bright Glory of Snow and Camellias, were in bloom as Brienne rode along the banks of the God’s Eye to Harrenhal. It was a beautiful journey. The sun was bright, the water of the lake calm and blue, the weather cool enough to wear armor comfortably, but sufficiently warm that she could still feel her fingers on her horse's reins. She lifted her face to the sky and enjoyed the glow of the sun on her skin. She'd probably just end up with more freckles, or a light sunburn, but that was a price she was prepared to pay to enjoy such easily available pleasures. She pitied the many women who were not able to make that choice.

She was riding north from Kings Landing with a contingent of soldiers under the command of Ser Daven Lannister. King Bran, aided by Tyrion, had been generous with pardons, even for Cersei's former kin, and Ser Daven, the former Warden of the West, had been left in command of most of the Westermen. Although unflinchingly loyal to Cersei, Ser Daven had been sensible enough to stay out of her crazier schemes, and had instead focused on keeping the Westerlands as peaceful as possible amid the chaos. Called to defend King’s Landing, he and his men had fought bravely, and reportedly spent much effort rescuing civilians from the rampage. In the chaotic aftermath, many had fallen to Grey Worm's knife, but despite their losses they remained a good sized force of well trained and armed men.

Still, they had been enemy combatants, and Bran had not been about to let them head home. Instead, he'd ordered that Ser Daven and his men assist with pacifying the Riverlands, and had placed them under Brienne’s command. She didn’t know whether her or Ser Daven had been more surprised by that. When introduced to him, Brienne had felt an uncomfortable embarrassment, and had expected resistance and the usual looks of derision and taunting. But he had given her none of it. While there had been no small amount of curiosity in his eyes, he had greeted her with a handclasp usually reserved for other knights - men - and had simply started briefing her. She had instantly respected him for it.

Ser Daven rode beside her now. He was tall and blond, like most of his kin, but as broad in the shoulder as any Baratheon, and where most Lannisters were well-groomed, he proudly bore a massive mane, a scruffy beard, and impressive mutton chops. *He really does look like a lion, far more than Jaime ever did.* He shared both Tyrion's bawdy humor and Jaime's insolent irreverence. The Riverlands Campaign was Ser Daven's opportunity to prove himself to the new regime, and he apparently intended to take it seriously, or at least as seriously as he took anything. Against all the
odds, Brienne genuinely liked him.

"Lord Commander," Ser Daven had noticed her attention, and inclined his head, inviting her question. "You have thoughts?"

She looked away quickly, disconcerted at having been caught appraising him, and tried to think of something to say. She settled on an appropriately complimentary platitude.

"I know it wasn't your choice to be here, but I appreciate the effort your men are putting in."

He laughed, a mighty sound. "Thanks? Nay, I owe it to you, my lady-Lord Commander. It might not have been my choice to come north again, but I couldn't be happier."

"Really? I would have thought you missed the west?"

"Being warden? Pft! It's a fucking nightmare, pardon my language."

Brienne shrugged. Swearing didn't worry her. "How so?"

"More boring than a Septon's morning preaching. I'm not one for scrolls and accounts or playing nice with my peers or listening to peasant squabbles. And I don't much care for being around my stout Frey of a wife for that matter, either. I'd rather be out here. Kicking the skulls of stray Freys and Boltons and the odd Karstack fucker."

Brienne sighed inwardly. If there was one thing that brought the Westermen and the Northmen together, it was a common dislike of a handful of families, at least two of which are now largely extinct. She wondered how Daven's wife felt about his obvious love of slaying her kin. _He probably doesn't care what she thinks_, she realised sadly. The constant barrage of comments of this kind from the men around her made her glad her destiny lay outside the nursery.

She imagined herself, sitting at home, nursing a baby, while her husband rode with his men and slandered her family. _Jaime wouldn't have done that_, came the unbidden thought. _Well, no more than he insulted anyone else. Which was rather a lot..._ She shoved the thought aside. _Stop going there._

"I think you'll find they're mainly, at most, Rivers and Snows and the odd Hill," she replied to Daven.

"Whoever. We'll kick whatever asses need kicking, my Lady."

They rode in silence for a moment, and then she said: "I can understand wanting to be on campaign, I was never one for recording keeping or needlework, myself."

Daven raised a huge, bushy eyebrow. "Or ruling either, if rumour has it. Everyone says you gave up Tarth to be Lord Commander, just as my coz gave up the rock."

_Jaime again_. Daven was probably curious, but he must have seen the flash of something across her face, because he quickly said, "Sorry, my lady. Ser. I didn't mean to bring up sad memories."

"No, it's fine. I don't mind talking about him." _As long as I can control my traitorous emotions, anyway._

Daven sat up a little straighter at that. "Well then, I knew him all my life, so if you want to hear embarrassing stories that'll make you glad you so narrowly escaped committing your life to him, just ask."
She couldn't help but be moved by the fondness in the large man's voice. Clearly, Jaime and he had a history. Her Jaime had been a solitary creature, lurking in her chambers or at his most social drinking with Pod and Tyrion. Daven's Jaime was clearly of a different mold.

"I'll keep that in mind," she said softly.

He winked at her, and she looked down at the reins. Of course, he thought Jaime and she were to be married. He and just about everyone else in the Seven Kingdoms.

Tyrion had warned her about this, but had also counselled her to use it to her advantage.

"Never fear your command, they will respect you because of your formidable reputation. Everyone in Westeros has heard of the brave and honourable Ser Brienne of Tarth, knight of the Seven Kingdoms and so on," Tyrion had advised her, over a cup of wine before she left to ride north. "But these Westermen also believe you were Jaime's betrothed, and they're use to following Jaime. He was a man that men liked to follow. If he trusted you, they will be inclined to as well."

Tyrion’s words had hurt her in ways she could not describe, but she had merely stared at her wine. Dornish, blood red like the Lannister colors. "I have no right - Jaime never -"

"Best not let anyone know that," Tyrion had cut her off quickly.

"I am not such a fool as to deny the rumour. But it's not the truth, and I still feel bad benefiting from it."

"There are many truths, and even more half-truths" Tyrion had replied gently, as he poured himself another cup of wine. "Some of which I prefer to others. Jaime knighted you. He respected you. He chose you. Milk that for all it is worth. I knew my brother, and can assure you he wouldn't mind."

She had taken Tyrion's advice, albeit in a low key way, neither affirming nor denying the rumour. Best let people think it's too traumatic for me to talk about. All those volatile female emotions. Another devious way her femininity could be used to her advantage.

Daven drew her attention back to the present, and pointed ahead. "Lord Commander - we are approaching Harrenhal."

Brienne looked up and saw the massive shadow on the horizon. Her stomach clenched and somersaulted in trepidation. The imposing, ruined castle, with its multiple crumbling towers, was about the last place she wanted to revisit, but go there she must. Harrenhal remained a festering sore on the countryside, offering sanctuary to band after band of outlaws, thugs and rapers. They had taken advantage of Lady Whent, thrived under Bolton and Ramsay, and been left to their own devices under Baelish. Always confident and rapacious, the now ungoverned thugs had descended into complete depravity and the countryside was in utter ruin as a result. Brienne was determined that the past decade's worth of official tolerance, if not effective endorsement of their behaviour, was about to end.

Brienne's host made camp on the edge of the God's Eye, and she called her command team to her pavilion to discuss the approach to seizing the castle. Her pavilion. It felt strange on her tongue and sounded to her ear. She was use to having a smaller tent, being summoned as needed, not doing the summoning. She tried not to feel surprised or nervous as her advisors and officers came as requested. The nervous, insecure part of Brienne still found it hard to believe that these men were not smirking at her behind her back, but she witnessed no condescension, no mocking looks or irritation. Just men ready to get to work.
The situation was not an easy one. King Bran has said there were only a couple of dozen truly capable fighters left in the castle, along with numerous hangers on. But crumbling ruin or not, Harrenhal was built for defence, and many of the traps and choke points would still be effective. “And idiot-proof,” Daven had added helpfully. A front-on assault would be brutal. While she was prepared to take that route if they had to, her preferred alternative was to besiege the castle and wait, but the downside to that was the time it would take. Time during which the fields would lie barren.

"I'm not sure we have the weeks needed to truly starve them out," Brienne pondered uncertainly.

"I wouldn't worry about it taking too long, they'll start eating each other at the first pangs of hunger," Daven laughed. "But waiting any time would be bloody annoying."

"We could parlay first, see what happens" said another of her team. Garret Flowers, son of Garth Tyrell. He was a former city watchman, but by all accounts a relatively competent soldier. Tyrion had suggested him to Brienne as a useful officer, capable of reading and writing, and she had taken his advice. Although he was nowhere near as entertaining or well trained as Pod, he did compliment her well, having the amiable charm so typical of his Tyrell bloodline. He was very good at dealing with most men, albeit less effective with these Lannisters, who hated everything Tyrell as a point of pride.

"Bugger that," said Daven dismissively, proving her thoughts. "What would we offer them? The sword rather than the noose? The gates are in poor repair, I say we just charge them down."

Brienne nodded. "That's an option, but the first through into the gatehouse will get a taste of boiling oil or boulders from above. I would rather not subject anyone to that."

Brienne remembered all too well the dozen murder holes lining the ceiling of the gatehouse, which she'd spied when being escorted to the castle by the so-called Brave Companions so many years ago. She would send men through that hell if need be, but she would prefer another option, one that did not lead to their certain, painful deaths.

Eventually, they decided to scout and assess the castle before coming to a final decision. She took Ser Daven, Garret and a dozen men, and rode the perimeter, close enough to be seen, but well out of reliable bow range. She had heard rumours of the terrible things that had happened to the smallfolk left at Harrenhal, and, having experienced the place herself, she had no doubt many of them were true. If there were people inside who needed help, or who could help her, she wanted them to know she was there.

Incredibly, fortune smiled on them. As they rode around the far, lake-side of the enormous castle, they spied an open postern gate. It wasn't large enough to allow for the admission of the the entire host, but it was sufficient to allow their small group through. They sat and stared at it for a minute.

"Seems too convenient," Brienne observed cautiously.

"On the other hand, the castle is frigging huge, it's impossible for a small force to guard everywhere," Daven replied. His hands were twitching on the reins, his eyes bright. He wanted in.

Brienne's gaze ranged from the gate to the tower above. A man was waving from it, beckoning to the open entrance. That was unusual, but as consistent with a trap as a welcome. She cast a glance around the small party. A dozen men, all well armed and mounted, with the possible advantage of surprise.

So long as this wasn't a trap.
Against her better judgment, she decided to risk it.

"King Bran believes there are only a couple of dozen fit combatants. This is our chance. The goal is to get to main gate and get it open."

She directed one of the younger men to ride back and prepare the host, then turned to look at the rest of them. They knew what she was asking of them. This was quite possibly the most foolish thing she had ever done, and likely among the most stupid any of the rest of them had done too, but a shiver of excitement was running through her, making her feel alive. She relished the thought of the coming battle. She'd had little opportunity to truly fight since the Battle of Winterfell. After that long, long night she had thought she was done, but now the adrenaline called to her. She longed for Pod by her side again, but he was in the Kings Landing, guarding Bran and the council. And probably courting several girls. She would have to trust her new companions, and hope they were as daring and proud as every other Lannister she'd met.

"We ready?" she asked. They cried their agreement. She hefted Oathkeeper, pressed her heels to her horse, and led her men into the Keep.

The postern gate opened into a short corridor beneath a decrepit tower and then into a small courtyard. To Brienne's relief, nothing rained down on them as they galloped through it. They found two men in the first courtyard, armed but not paying the least bit of attention. Brienne took out the first before he even had time to turn around, and a second fell to another of her men moments later, although not before he managed to scream. Oh well, the sound of the horses will probably have alerted everyone anyway. They advanced into the main courtyard with little real resistance, striking at the assembled brigands.

Arrows rained down from the above, horses screamed, one of her men gave a cry of pain, but she didn't have time to look. They would have to close on the archers, and fast.

"On the walls," she cried at the men to her right. They dismounted, and several started climbing the towers.

She galloped her horse across the courtyard, and struck at another of the armed brigands standing before her. He fell, his body nearly cleaved in two. The damage wrought by Valyrian steel blade backed by a horses' momentum was devastating.

More arrows fell, one connecting with her horses' neck. The animal screamed in pain and reared, and she threw herself off, landing gracelessly but upright beside it. She belted the creature's side to make it flee out of the courtyard. It was mainly a liability in here anyway. She then took shelter beneath a wall and surveyed the courtyard.

The Harrenhal forces were blood thirsty and brutal, but poorly prepared and utterly disorganised, and their strategy, if you could call it that, was 'every man for himself'. While some were eager to fight the intruders, many simply dropped their weapons and fled or fell to their stomachs. Still, one of the Lannister soldiers was fighting three bandits on the other side of the courtyard, and they appeared to be getting the best of him.

Brienne took a breath, and rushed across the courtyard, braving the archers. As she did, one of the men on the ground, who she assumed had surrendered, grabbed at her leg, attempting to topple her. She drove her blade into his back and his grip weakened immediately. She kicked him in the head, hard, and continued across the courtyard, using her momentum to plunge her sword into the back of one of the men attacking her soldier. The man screamed, and fell. When she pulled the sword back out, it was covered in red.
"Ser Brienne, behind you!" Garrett's voice rang through the courtyard, from somewhere on the walls.

She turned, and barely had time to dodge the swing of a huge hammer, aimed at her head. Its wielder was one of the bigger bandits, taller even than her. Fortunately, strong as he was, the weapon was slow, and she had time to turn around and face him. Perhaps recognising that his days were numbered, and determined to go out fighting, he advanced on her again, hammer swinging. She ducked back again. She hated hammers, far messier than a sword, and capable of doing real damage to her armour, but slow and ponderous even in trained hands. The thug swung again, and this time she was ready. She kited back, and came back at him with a blow from the side, Oathkeeper slicing through her foe's leather jerkin to bite deep into the flesh of his side. There was a wet, sucking sound as she wrenched the blade free. The thug barely flinched, allowing his momentum to bring the hammer through a complete circle, back around toward her head. She only just dodged, feeling the wind of the weapon rush past her face. The swing exposed a portion of the thug's arm, and Brienne grabbed her chance and swung Oathkeeper up, nearly severing one of this hands. Blood poured out of the wound, and the huge bandit screamed. Brienne delivered a final thrust to his neck, and the man fell to the ground.

Gasping for breath, she turned quickly to survey the courtyard. Only Kings men were standing. She looked up at the ramparts, and there too dead bandits were slumped over the walls. Standing admit the carnage, she called for the handful of remaining bandits in the gatehouse to open the gates, and they relented immediately, accepting defeat and hoping to escape with their lives.

The gates opened, and the remainder of the host started flooding in.

Brienne released her long breath, and slumped over, hands on her knees. They'd won. She did a quick appraisal of injuries. Her arm hurt where an arrow had hit, but it hadn't penetrated the chain. Otherwise, she was covered in blood, but none of it seemed to be hers.

When she looked up, Daven was making his way across the courtyard to her. "Good work, Lord Commander," he boomed, bowing his head to her. He was covered in as much filth as her, his massive two handed blade stained crimson. "That call took guts."

She stood up and nodded in acknowledgement. "Your men fought well," she said.

"Your men." He corrected her. He rested his sword over one shoulder, and surveyed the mess. "Pretty pathetic bunch of rabble, but the numbers were against us, so we can take plenty of credit."

"The smarter ones fled. Their leaders are probably hiding somewhere in the castle, we'll need to be careful," she warned. "Lets get some of these men searching, in groups. See if we can make an area that's safe."

The castle was indeed immense, and if anyone was hiding in it, they could probably do so for days without discovery, food and water permitting.

"We'll get the rest of the men in, go through step by step, starting with the main keep," Daven promised, bowing rather dramatically as he backed away. He turned back toward the soldiers, yelling orders.

She watched as the men got to work, a sense of pride riding in her chest. We've done it.

"We found who opened the gate," said another voice.

She turned to see Garret beside her. He had a gash on his head, but otherwise looked in good shape.
He bowed his head to her with respect. "You should take the credit, Lord Commander. The cook opened the gate. He heard the 'Maid of Tarth' had come to rescue him. Your reputation precedes you."

The Maid of Tarth. Well, maid no more, but even so, she could not prevent the smile she knew had broken across her face. She actually felt a little dizzy. It was almost too much, too unreal. Not only had they succeeded, but they had done so very few casualties. Two men had arrow wounds, and a few had gashes, but none would be fatal with appropriate care. A dozen bandits lay dead in the main courtyard, two others in the smaller entry yard, and several on the walls. Many more had surrendered. She had captured a castle, with little loss of life.

And not just any castle, Harrenhal.

The rest of the morning went quickly. More bandits and hangers on were rounded up and imprisoned. Some appeared to be local men, driven to banditry by desperate circumstances, and those she was determine to grant a trial, and perhaps a period in the dungeons or laboring, but many others had reputations that proceeded them, and some few she recognised as Locke's old men. Those she hung without hesitation.

The rebellious cook she met and congratulated. He was a hard, crude man, and from the way he looked at her, she had the distinct impression that he'd been in the audience watching her in the bear pit. Still, he had lost his foot to one of Locke's men, and his teeth to another, so clearly he'd suffered enough. She offered him a pension, which he accepted, although he insisted on staying at the castle.

"Never lived anywhere else, my Lady," he explained, effectively confirming her suspicions about the pit.

She was used to people spending their entire lives on Tarth, but it still surprised her how many of mainlanders could live their entire lives in just one building, even one as enormous as Harrenhal. No building in Tarth was large enough to contain someone’s whole life.

Once the most pressing administrative business was taken care of, Brienne acquired rooms for herself in one of the better kept areas of the castle, well away from where she had been imprisoned before. Even in its best parts, Harrenhal was a dark, dour place, filled with secrets and despair. They would stay a few nights, and then leave a couple of hundred soldiers to garrison the castle and head up to the Twins. Lord Edmure was meant to be cleaning up the northern Riverlands, but no one really trusted him to get anything useful done, and the Twins was probably too far away for a projection of Tully force anyway. She found her map, opened it out on a large table, and began contemplating the route.

Yet try as she may, she couldn’t concentrate. Harrenhal was too full of memories. Her mind kept drifting, to the bear pit, the dining room, and the baths.

The baths.

Her men had been eager to try the famous Harrenhal baths, and no doubt that is where many of them were now, so she had stayed away. As much as she wanted to be accepted, naked bathing in a room of them was a step too far. Whatever was left of her reputation would be completely gone. Besides, the idea filled her with disgust. She could imagine Yara Greyjoy doing it, probably joking and manhandling her naked comrades as she did so, but knight or no, Brienne was not that kind of woman. She supposed she could order them all out to make room for her, but she wasn’t sure that would make a good impression. She wasn’t even sure she really wanted to go down there anyway. The memories were still so raw.
Unbidden, she saw Jaime in the water, lank hair hiding his filthy face, eyes glazed with pain and illness, bandaged stump held high.

_I trust you._

He'd said that to her, as they sat in the water, and from that moment she had been lost. No one else had ever trusted her like that, not with their body, their safety, their secrets, their life.

_Would you have done it?_

Those words still echoed in her head too. Would she have kept her oath to the Mad King? _No_, she thought. _I wouldn't have. If there was ever a time I would have put my vows over the lives of innocents, I would not do it now. Not for Renly, not even for Sansa. I would have done what you did Jaime._

_But I would not have allowed my pride to stop me telling people why._

And there came that wave of emotion again, the sick, mournful feeling of loss. _When was it going to end?_ No, she couldn't face the baths, not yet. She asked for water to be brought to her room and cleaned herself quickly there.

Once dressed, Brienne plowed her way through preparations and ration lists, briefly conversing with Garrett over the logistics of the trials, and Daven over more captured bandits, before working alone again. Yet as evening approached, she felt restless. Unable to avoid the castle’s call any longer, she pulled on a cloak, and left her chambers to explore the ruins.

Eventually, inevitably perhaps, she found herself standing on the edge of bear pit, gazing down.

All things considered, the bear had been the comparative high point of her final days at Harrenhal - the memories of that night before it in many ways worse than the pit itself. She remembered the humiliation of imprisonment, the taunts of the guards. She remembered a septa examining her, questioning her about her maidenhead, prodding and digging while that creepy Qyburn watched on. She remembered Locke on top of her, attempting to assault her, until she'd kicked him so hard in the groin he required a master's treatment. _That was when they decided to feed me to the bear._ She remembered the night of sitting upright against the wall, afraid to sleep, to even close her eyes, listening to the threats from other men, near drowning in her fear while imagining the terrible, undignified fate she was likely to face the next morning. Afraid, too, of the effect it would have on her father. When Locke’s men finally came for her, she'd gone with every bit of dignity she could muster, determined not to let any of the bastards see her fear, or gain any pleasure from it. Given everything else, when standing in the pit in a flimsy dress, clasping that flimsy wooden tourney sword, she'd seen the bear, it had almost been a relief.

_It will hurt me, it will kill me, but then it will be over._

She could still recall with perfect clarity the bear’s raw animal smell, its lost and hungry eyes, the searing pain of its claws slashing at her neck. It had been just a scared animal. Nowhere near as horrifying as the eyes and the hands of the men who had tried to hurt her first.

Brienne reached up and touched the deep scars above her collarbone, running her fingers over them. Jaime had kissed them nearly every time they were together, and she could still feel his lips on her skin. He had jumped, unarmed and one-handed, into that pit, to protect her. To rescue her. Not a maiden in a tower, but a warrior in a pit. If she had not already been a little bit in love with him in the baths, then she had been from that moment.
It felt like a thousand years ago.

It felt like yesterday.

"My Lady?"

She jumped, startled, then looked up. She could see two men approaching her, cautiously. Daven and Garret. She was surprised, but pleased, to see them together. They must have had something of a civil conversation to get this far without killing each other.

Even in the dim light of evening, she could see the concern in Garret's large, brown eyes. She no doubt looked a mess.

"Are you well my lady?" He asked.

"It's fine, Ser Garrett, Ser Daven." She pulled herself together, pushed herself off the railing and turned to face them. "I just have many memories of this place."

Garret nodded and shifted a little uncomfortably. "Yes, ser. Those memories are now part legend."

Really? She shot him a quick look. "Do I want to know?"

"They say you fought a bear down there, ser," Garret said.

"I didn’t fight the bear so much as survive it. I had only a wooden tourney sword. I would have died, had not Ser Jaime not jumped in to my rescue."

"That sounds like him." Daven said. Then, with a typical lack of tack, he added, "they say you fought it naked."

Garret sounded like he was choking on his tongue, but Brienne only snorted. Yes, she knew that story, although not where it came from. The first time she had heard it, it made her squirm with embarrassment, but these days she found it amusing.

"I think I would almost have preferred to be naked. They put me in an awful pink dress that constantly made me trip up. And pink is not my colour."

Daven roared with laughter at that. "You just get better and better."

Garret was still flushed red, but nodded his agreement.

Brienne smiled. She was rarely witty, so that was an achievement, even if a melancholy one. "I'm glad my near-death experience has given you some amusement, Ser Daven."

"Yes, my lady. But we didn't come to swap japes."

"Oh?"

Garrett coughed. "The cook is laying out quite the feast. Everyone is waiting in the main hall for supper, but he won't serve it till the head table are all present. I think he made something special for you, so if you would please come..."

"...we can get started in the feasting," Davon finished.

Dinner. She felt a wave of embarrassed frustration flow over her. Of course they would be waiting. She had forgotten both about food, and about this part of being the Lord Commander. She would
need to be at the head table, and look happy, and talk, at least as long as the feat kept coming out, which hopefully wouldn't be for very long. Harrenhal was unlikely to have anymore spare food than the rest of Westeros.

"Oh, of course," she gathered her wits, and started toward the Hall. "Yes, please lead on."

She stayed at the banquet long enough to be seen, and even delivered an impromptu speech thanking the men, before telling them to enjoy their meat. It hadn't been a great speech, not up to her father's eloquent standards, but it was much better than anything she'd delivered on Tarth. Her voice hadn't trembled, and she had even earned a cheer. She was getting better as this. She could do this.

As the last of the food was wiped up, she left her men to their drinking and carousing, local women and camp followers having made their presence known. They would undoubtedly all feel more comfortable if she wasn't there to see the results of that.

Anyway, she had somewhere else to be.

The baths, when she made it there, were empty and wonderfully quiet. A single torch emitted a soft glow, but otherwise it was dark and inviting, the waters still and calm, the air alive with dancing tendrils of steam. Brienne stripped off her clothing, leaving it within easy reach, and slipped into the waters of the bath - the same bath. She let the steam rise around her, and memory engulf her.

She could still picture Jaime emerging from the steam, naked and unashamed. He'd been skinny, maimed, sick, covered in filth, and yet still the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. More beautiful even than Renly. The memory brought a wave of heat to her stomach, her groin. Not so hard, you'll take the skin off, he'd warned her as she scrubbed. She took his advice now, and gentled her touch. She dropped to cloth, and allowed her hands to range across her breasts, her stomach, her thighs, and finally, between her legs.

"Have you ever touched yourself?" Jaime had asked her, one night at Winterfell, as he drew himself back from a kiss, his lower body pressed to hers, eyes burning.

"Yes," she'd said. I touch myself, and think of you, is what she'd wanted to say.

But he whispered his answer first, his breath hot against her ear. "I stroke myself, and think of you."

He'd pushed himself off her then, onto his haunches, then leaned his back negligently against the wall behind her bed. He'd parted his legs, displaying his cock, red and hot against his stomach. He'd taken it in his hand, stroked himself slowly as she'd watched, eyes wide, her groin burning with desire.

"I touch myself like this..." he'd demonstrated with a self-satisfied groan, hand gliding across hot skin. "I imagine being inside you, your soft cunt holding me, squeezing me, milking me...yeah."

He'd moaned, and closed his eyes, lost in pleasure, before he opened them to look at her.

"Show me...Show me what you do, Brienne."

Terrified, scandalized, riveted and aroused, she'd sat up against the pillows on the other end of the bed, and moved her hand to the juncture between her legs to show him what she did. He'd watched, gaze hot and predatory, mouth slightly opened, tongue dashing out to lick his lips, as she'd parted her folds and explored.
"Open your legs wider, let me see you," he'd panted, after a minute, his own hand moving faster on his cock, thumb drawing away the moisture at its tip.

She had done as he asked, let her knees fall open, parted her legs, and let him see her all. Fingers ablaze with motion, wanton and desperate. She’d come undone for him with a moan.

“Fuck,” he'd gasped as she did. "Gods, what you do to me woman...” Then he'd pulled hard on his cock, once twice, and followed her over the precipice, spilling himself on his stomach and the sheets with a cry that could be heard across Winterfell.

The memory of that night, of them, was so vivid she was agonisingly aroused before putting any real effort in. She brought herself off quickly, water splashing as her legs jerked when she came. Then she leaned back against the wall of the bath, and caught her breath. She wanted the agony, the longing, to be gone. But this, at least, she did not want to forget. Not that there was any risk of that here. The memories were so intense she felt hot again just thinking on them. She brought herself to completion again before she left, imagining Jaime walking to her through the steam.

When she finished, she got dressed, went back to her rooms, and fell asleep. Some ghosts, at least, had been laid to rest along with the bandits.

Three days later, they left for the Twins.

CERSEI

The women's huts - the Quiet Isle

Cersei stared at her hands.

She had once had such beautiful hands. Soft and pale, long fingered and graceful.

Now her once pale skin was jaundiced and orangey. The colour of sunrise and marigolds and small girls’ dresses. Orange had never been her colour. That had always been gold.

On her orange hand were five skinny fingers, nearly all bone. If I still had my rings, they would fall to the ground, she thought bitterly. But she had no jewels. No decoration. Her hands were like a peasant’s. Even her nails were short. She had been declawed. Blunted, like Jaime.

She wondered what her hair looked like, her face. Her skin was naked, no cosmetics to hide her flaws. Was her face ugly now too? Surely that couldn't be? She was more beautiful than any woman. Jaime had always said so, and plenty of others besides.

Naked. The word made her sick. Sicker even than she was, because it was a different, deeper kind of illness, a sickness in her mind and heart. She'd rarely been naked, even with Jaime. Too risky, too obvious what they were doing if they were caught. Better to let him move aside her bodice, crawl beneath her skirts. She liked him crawling, on his knees.

She’d never deigned to get naked for a Lancel or Kettleback or Euron. She liked them crawling, or climbing too.

Naked was what she been on that walk of shame. Uncovered, until she had pelted with such filth that it had covered her shame. The people, her people, had done that to her. They had hated her. And I hated them. Hated them for what they did to me, how they laughed at me. But I got revenge...
She could remember it now. The green had been so beautiful. She could feel the warmth of it on her face, her arms, her breasts. *But not inside me, the warmth never reached inside me.* Inside she still felt corrupted, polluted, dirty and cold. Shrivelled and frozen. Nothing could make inside her feel warm.

*Except Jaime.* Jaime could make her feel warm. Jaime didn't care about the lines and the dirt and the shame.

*Where was Jaime?*

She called for him, didn't she? She thought she did. Did she make a sound? It was now so hard to tell...

"Here, Cersei. I'm here."

His voice. *Here. Here. Here.* The words echoed through her mind.

She opened her eyes - when had she closed them? - made them focus. A man stood in the doorway, an old man, leaning on the frame. He was short a hand - *where is his golden hand?* He looked scared, and scarred too. She wanted to reach for him, cry for him to come to her, but she couldn't. She wouldn't. The man in the doorway was not her loin, her twin, her shadow. He was not golden. He was dull, tarnished, brown like the mud and dirt they had thrown at her.

The man in the doorway was not her Jaime.

The not-quite-Jaime stumbled toward her. His eyes were sad and stained red. Had he been crying? *Crying is a sign of weakness in a man,* their father had said. Had he not listened? He never listened. Did he dare cry, show his weakness around her? Her Jaime would never cry, had never cried, even when mother died, and father. Her Jaime was fierce and brave and he would fight for her. He would fight this corruption in her, and he would win, because he always won. He always won for her. He cared only for her. Had he not sworn that it would always be so?

*Sworn that all that matters is us.*

But this was not that Jaime. Her Jaime. She mourned his loss. *Was it we who died together?*

Yet, when *this Jaime* reached for her and drew her to him, she had not the strength to refuse him.

"Cersei..." he whispered gently. He stroked her hair.

He was trying to be gentle, comforting. *Pathetic. He should be angry.* Did he not want her? Why was he just holding her, when they should be fighting or fucking? She tried to reach for the laces of his shirt, but her arms did not move. Her body had betrayed her. Why had everyone and everything betrayed her? Even Jaime. He had changed despite her, maybe even to spite her. He was no longer her reflection, just a distorted blur.

She wanted to heal him, to bring him back to her whole and fierce and brave again. She wanted to hurt him, to punish him for what he had become.

Cersei steeled herself and tried to talk. It was hard to spend the energy to think, to form words, to move her lips. But talk she would. She forced herself back through the fog of her mind, to the hut, and the present, and the pain.

"You'll be pleased to hear that I am not long for this world," she gasped.
It was not her voice, but the voice on old woman. *Fine.* Let him know that it pained her. Let him know that she fought.

"I'm not pleased to hear that, Cersei," Jaime replied.

His voice cracked, and she felt a small softening in her heart. She couldn’t allow it. *We are lions, not sheep. We cannot be weak.*

She could feel his arms, his hand, strong and gentle as he held her. He was warm, so warm, and there was comfort in him, even if he was not her Jaime. She turned into his chest, pressed her weight against his body. He flinched, not at her touch, but at the pain she caused him. He had still not healed, she realised, not really, the scares on his stomach, back and flanks likely still fresh, the muscle underneath still tender. *Perhaps he will never be fully healed,* she thought. *Good. Let him carry the wounds always, a reminder of what we had. Of what he did.*

Yet despite the pain, he pulled her to him, and held her tight. He shuddered, and she could not hold inside a soft sob.

"Should I call for a septon," Jaime asked gently, hand stroking her hair. "So you can confess?"

She gasped, went rigid. *A Septon? For what? Was he mad? Septons had nothing to offer, except empty words and abandoned promises and cruel, cruel punishments. Had she not burned them all, turned them that lovely green? They would offer her nothing.*

"You still think I want absolution? I don't believe a septon can do that, and nor do you," she whispered, voice muffled against him.

"Maybe not," he agreed. "But is it not worth a try? I want to believe you'll be with our children, soon, Cersei. I have to believe that."

His voice was high, distraught. *Stop it,* she wanted to say. *Be Strong. Be my Jaime, not hers.*

She lashed out at him instead. "Wherever I am going, Jaime, whatever level of the seven hells, pray it is not with Myrcella and Tommen, for their sake."

He clutched her closer at that, almost crushing her. "Please, Cersei, try."

He was crying, the fool. Crying to gods they had both forsaken. She was not so lacking in dignity as to to crawl back to them now. *What god would accept a deathbed reversion from a traitorous doubter?* No god she respected would. She wouldn't. No, she would not die on her knees, not before anyone, not even a god.

Her Jaime would understand. She wanted her Jaime. Her ferocious lion. She knew only one way to get him.

"You still think I want to confess? To pretend to feel guilty?" she asked, her voice between a croak and a whisper. She turned her face up to look at him, wanting to ensure he heard every word. "The only thing I regret is that I believed your promise of rescue, followed you down those passages. I should have stayed on that throne, died a queen, not a coward buried in rubble, or an old woman wasting away here. *That is all I regret Jaime. And for that, I blame you.*"

She watched his face fall, from fear to shock to devastation, and then into disgust, before he again affixed that disdainful blank mask he’d worn for so many years. *The kingslayer.* She’d hurt him. *Good.* But while he bristled, he didn't fight. *He has lost his claws, his bite.* Instead he held her close, and said, again, "I'm sorry, Cersei. For what you have become, and for my part in it."
She stared at him blankly.

Had her Jaime ever truly existed? If so, he was gone.

Later, she felt him release her from his arms, heard him stand up. With him went the warmth, and the cold hands of death reached closer in its stead. She welcomed them. She hurt. Pain, and nausea. She could feel herself melting away as the agony eroded her.

_Mercy_, she thought. But who could she plead to? She was the queen, the only rightful grantor of clemency among men, and no gods would answer her call.

"I should be dead, Jaime. I have lived to long," she whispered, as she shivered.

He knelt back down, took her hand. "I know, I'm... sorry."

"You apologise but do nothing. I don't want to endure this, Jaime. Please."

She looked up and met his eyes. _Please end it. Please understand._

He frowned, shook his head. "I...I can't."

"You have to."

"I can't, Cersei."

_Coward_, she thought. _Was his courage truly in his swordhand?_

"If I couldn't do it to save the people of King's Landing, I certainly can't do it now."

"You can, Jaime, because you will be doing it for me."

He shook his head, vigorously this time. "I won't."

He tried to move away from her, but she used what little strength she had left to hold him tightly.

"I hate you," she whispered to him.

"I love you," he responded, stroking her hair.

"But not enough," she answered. _Not enough to stop me, not enough to kill me._

Death was elusive. She wanted to rage, to fight, to swear, to fuck. But she couldn’t. So instead, she slept.

Later, she was aware of Jaime moving, preparing something. The smell of woodsmoke, herbs, tea, sweat. He came back to her. She opened her eyes, to see his face looming above her, his hand clasping a drink, his expression carefully neutral but his eyes worried and soft.

_Still not my Jaime. But this one will do._

"Here," he said, voice thick. "This will help with the pain."

Willowbark and poppy. She drank it eagerly, then almost gagged when it wouldn't go down.

"Slowly..." he whispered, rubbing her back. It took time, but she managed it.

He put the cup aside, and again drew her into his arms. He smelt of salt from the sea, and leather,
and sweat. His beard, his horrible beard, the beard that belonged to the other Jamie, scratched her face.

"Should...have...shaved," she murmured, painfully, but she was not sure he heard her. He probably didn't understand. He leaned down, and kissed her on the forehead, and then the lips. She wanted to touch his face, but her arms didn’t work, and she did not wish to touch the beard.

The world was spinning around her, Jaime's image wavered. She could see him now, as he was, young and golden and smiling at her, the spires of Casterly Rock looming behind him. He was so beautiful, like her, her mirror image, her other half. She looked around, and there were her children, their children. Joffrey and Myrcella and Tommen and a tow-haired babe. Gold like the sand, and the sun, like Jaime and her.

They were together, just them, at the rock, like he wanted.

"Nothing else matters," She said to Jaime, her Jaime, as he walked across the beach toward her. The other Jaime was here to, somewhere, she could feel his arms around her. He might have been crying. But her Jaime wasn't crying, he was roaring, and when he stroked her face it was with two good hands.

She pulled him down to her, in the darkness of the room and the bright light of her mind.

She pulled his arms around her, and waited for the blissful relief of the poppy.

The world and everything in it, everything but them, could burn.

Nothing else mattered.

JAIME

The banks of the Bay of Crabs - the Quiet Isle

It was over.

Cersei was gone, and he was numb.

He had held her, after she passed, until the silent sisters came for her. Minutes? Hours? He didn’t know. When it was finally over, he had walked outside and vomited.

Mindlessly, he had wandered down to the water’s edge, where he stood now. He needed to bathe, to cleanse himself of the tangible and intangible reminders of his sister's passing. He stripped naked - even that was nowhere near as easy as it use to be - and let the cold air bite at his skin, and then he waded into the Bay of Crabs.

He hoped the water would wash away his guilt and grief and pain. It didn't. But the freezing water was bracing, and he felt better for it anyway. At least he felt something, even if it was only bloody cold.

Standing in the Bay, feet buried in the sand, Jaime stared down at his body. The hair on his chest was nearly grey, his stomach hollow and deeply scared - the wounds from Euron's blades still ugly red scars. His right arm had lost even more mass, and on his left only thin, rangy muscle survived.
His legs bore the long, red scars from where Arya had opened him up. He was a mess, little more
than a walking corpse. *At Winterfell I may have been mistaken for the dead.*

How was it he still alive. How did he even deserve to be?

He left the water, shook himself somewhat dry, and then pulled on his breeches and shirt, his
tattered black leather coat and boots. As always, the laces were a challenge, and he gave up on the
ties at his neck. Who cared what he looked like anyway?

He wandered back to the chantry on the top of the hill.

*Cersei is gone.* The thought reverberated through his mind, never resting such that he could
examine it. He had never lived in a world without her shadow. *And yet here I am.* It was almost
inconceivable.

True, there had been times when he had imagined Cersei dead. He’d realised at Winterfell that as
long as she was alive, he would never be free of her. On that bitter ride south from Winterfell to
Kings Landing, he had vacillated between wanting to die with her, and wanting to be free of her.
Even as he’d reached Kings Landing, he didn’t know what he was going to do. His capture by
Daenerys' people had been almost a relief, an abdication of his need to make a decision. But sitting
in that tent, tied to the pole, waiting for his fate to catch up to him, he’d realised that he would
never have able to kill her, certainly not while she was pregnant with their child, and not anyway,
and nor could he abandon her and let someone else do it instead. They were bound together, Cersei
and he, and he would always save her if he could, no matter her folly, or his. He always had.
Tyrion had known that too. Hence his stupid plan.

Only now he didn’t have to save her anymore. He couldn't save her this time, and so now she was
gone.

The Elder Brother waited for him at the crest of the hill, hands buried in his bell sleeves. He gave
him an appraising look from beneath his hood as he approached.

"It is over. You are leaving."

"Yes, I don't want to bring any trouble here."

"Trouble is the least of our concerns, and no good reason for leaving. But you were not made to be
a brother, Ser Jaime, let alone a silent one, and so you must."

Jaime couldn’t agree more, at least about being a septon. And the silence. “No. I was made for
the battlefield. That’s all I have ever been good at. I’ve always been bloody hopeless at everything
else. But you're right, I need to find a new path, and I can't do that here.”

"Do you know what you'll do, then?"

"No."

He knew what he *wanted* to do. Ride back to Brienne, surprise and delight her with how *alive* he
was, fall at her feet, and ask her to take him back. In his dreams, she’d welcome him back with
open arms, of course, and she'd tell him that she loved him, and she'd missed him, and she forgave
him it all. And then they'd go back to her chambers - *their chambers* - and he'd show her how
much he missed her, and he’d be inside her when he told her how much he loved her, and
everything would got back to how it was before. Except that he'd marry her, and when he took her
as his wife, he'd spend himself inside her, and they could start a family and ... fuck. *Why am my
torturing myself like this?* He shook his head. No. That wasn't going to work. It wouldn't be that
simple. It couldn’t be. It probably even shouldn’t be.

*Brienne is not my redemption. I have to earn that. And her, if she'll ever take me back.*

"No really," he corrected. “I have no skills, beyond being a knight, and I can't run forever anyway. I have no option but return to Kings Landing, turn myself in, and offer my services to the king, or queen, and hope they don't execute me."

The Elder Brother fixed him was an undefinable look. "Do you know who the king is?"

Jaime shrugged. "No. Do you?"

"Only rumours. You will see soon enough, I imagine."

He supposed he would. He hoped it was Snow. Snow he could deal with. But the Elder Brother’s obfuscation gave him cause for concern.

He stood vigil for Cersei for seven mornings, sword clasped in his good hand, and he attended her evening prayers for seven nights. It was a poor funeral for a former queen, and far removed from his father’s, but it was still more than many would think she deserved. By the end her corpse, much like that of Tywin, had been rotting.

When the vigil was done, and her body removed, he stayed, watching, until she was properly interned. Then he went back to his cell, collected what little he had, and made his way to the stables.

The cart was waiting for him, but without Cersei it seemed an unnecessary burden. He would trade it for a horse at the next town, if he could. He could ride then, the wind in his hair.

He grieved for Cersei, but there was relief too. He would always miss her. He would always love her. But for the first time in his life, he was free.

He climbed into the seat, flicked the reins, and started along the journey to his new life.

**BRIENNE**

**The Twins**

Brienne stood on the ramparts of the Twins, watching the waters of the Green Fork rush by. Ser Daven stood at her side, an impressive mug of ale in his hand, and a perfect white Lannister grin plastered on his broad, smug face.

They had done it. They had made their way from Harrenhal to the Twins, bringing justice and order, or at least some semblance of it, with them. Granted, many areas of the Riverlands were still a mess, but the main forts and castles were garrisoned, the fields planted and the worst of the bandits imprisoned or dead. Things were on their way to being made right, even if they still had a way to go.

"I'll say it again, Lord Commander - bloody well done," Daven said, taking a long drink of his ale.

She smiled, as much to herself as to him.

"Thank you, for trusting me," she said, and she meant it.
She had been an inexperienced commander, a Stormlander, newly knighted and a woman, and yet he, and hence his men, had followed her. And not just that, they had put in their all, and they had won.

Daven looked momentarily surprised at gratitude, but then he laughed and shook his head. "Women".

She glared at him, "what?"

"Of course we trust you," he rolled his eyes. "Even putting aside the fact we keep winning when we follow you, you're a fucking legend. Look at your story. You won that melee at Bitterbridge and beat all the namby Tyrells, including that puffed up little poser Loras. You fought the Hound, and beat him too. You fought the dead at Winterfell, and beat them. You killed Stannis, and Renly as well - ah, yes, I know you deny that last one, but don't disabuse my men of their romantic fantasy that you wiped out two out of three Baratheons. You were knighted by Jaime Lannister, and no one was ever good enough for him. And beside that, you're the bloody Lord Commander." He turned to look at her solemnly, and added almost earnestly, "never doubt that me and my men will follow you, my lady. You're the best they've ever had."

She looked down at her feet, embarrassed and unsure what to say. She could feel the tears in her eyes again, but blinked them away.

"Thank you, Ser Daven."

"Aw, for fucks sake, don't get teary, or I may have to reconsider my words. Bloody women."

The smiled, and he chuckled, and they turned back to admire the view. The sun was setting, shades of orange, pink and red burning across the sky.

Daven let out a long breath. "I shouldn't talk about such things with you, my lady, but remember, also, that to most of us, whether you like it or loathe it, you're very nearly a Lannister. You were Jaime's woman, and he could've had anyone. As far was we're concerned, you're our Lady of Casterly Rock, or you should be. We'd follow you off the cliffs that surround the castle, if you asked."

She couldn't think of anything to say to that. She swiped the back of her gauntlet across her eyes. It didn't do much other than smear the tears, but Daven seemed willing to let it go. He slapped a huge hand, bigger even than hers, on her shoulder.

"C'mon, ser, enough thinking. I know you're not one for drinking or feasts, or making merry, but at least come and show your face at dinner, so I can say pretty much the same thing in there that I said out here, and you can get all flustered, eat only a little, not drink, and still retire early with a cheer in your ear."

Now it was her turn to roll her eyes. "All right, let's go."

She fell into step beside him. Almost a Lannister. Lannister was the most reviled family name in Westeros, except for maybe Targaryan, but even that was close. She should be shocked, disturbed, even disgusted, but after all that had happened these last weeks, she was actually rather proud.

As she walked back to the hall together, she realised something. Daven was her friend. Garret too, and there were others here as well. Others who she could talk to, and laugh with, who she could relive battles with and even share a little gossip. She'd never be outgoing, or sociable, and she never would, but here she had friends, and, even better, respect. She was part of something, and
best of all, she’d helped build it.

*I’m happy,* she thought finally. *I belong.*

She was almost at the great hall when she heard another voice call her name.

"Lord Commander!"

She turned to the source of the voice. One of the squires. Peck. “Yes?”

"Lord Commander, you have a visitor. Lord Seaworth! He’s ridden from Seagard, and he says it important. Please come quick."

*Davos?* A tremor of trepidation shot down her spine. *What is he doing here?*

She clasped Daven's arm. “Duty calls. You take over.”

He nodded his acknowledgement, and Brienne turned to follow Peck, bracing herself for news she couldn’t imagine would be good.

Chapter End Notes

In relation to the "Jaime's woman" comment, see the discussion in the comments below from ginar369 and Wirrette.
Offerings

Chapter Notes

Another transition chapter. Mainly emotional introspection, again. As the next part is really just in need of editing, it should be ready in a couple of days. Bring on the reunion (and plot). Thank you all so much for reading.

Davos

Well, this is about as fucked up as fucked up gets.

Lord Davos Seaworth, Master of Ships, shuffled his feet and cracked his remaining knuckles as he waited for the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard in the scruffy, underlit receiving room in the Twins. Of all the shitty tasks he’d been lumped with in his new role as a member of the Small Council, this was about the worst. For the life of him, he couldn’t work out what part of the role of Master of Ships involved wading into the mummer’s tale that was the relationship between Brienne of Tarth and Jaime Lannister.

The part of the role where you saved Lannister’s life and then forgot to tell his lady that you did so, his traitorous conscience reminded him.

He glanced longingly at the decanter of wine sitting on a nearby table. He was sorely tempted to help himself. He preferred ale, but this was the kind of conversation that benefited from any type of alcohol.

"Lord Seaworth."

Brienne’s voice sounded from behind him, and he turned to see her hulking figure in the doorway. She stood erect, hands behind her back, every inch the formal and restrained Lord Commander, but her blue eyes betrayed her obvious pleasure at seeing him, lighting up her face and giving her a much more youthful appearance. She looks good, he thought, and if not happy then at least content. Her face even had some colour in it, something which was missing in the sunless north. He felt immediately guilty for bringing news that was going to disturb her apparent newfound peace.

"Lord Commander," he inclined his head in a mutual greeting. And then, because all the formally was too grating, he added, "it's good to see you, Brienne."

She almost smiled, letting herself relax a little. "You too, Davos."

She stepped forward into the room, started to raise her arms, almost as if to embrace him, but then, uneasily, stopped and hovered just out of arms reach. Davos had half a mind to just put his arms around her, but after a moment’s thought, decided against it. He was still not use to working with women as peers, and the etiquette was damned confusing. He settled for a quick clap on her chain-clad arm. Always wearing armour. Even Stannis took his off when not facing battle.

"You're looking well, Lord Commander," Davos commended her. "And doing well, too, for all I
hear. People are singing your praises across six kingdoms. Seven, if I know Queen Sansa.”

She proffered a real smile at that, and Davos was reminded of the night Lannister had knighted her. She'd been beaming, bright eyed and glowing with pleasure. He'd not seen it since, not even at that Winterfell banquet where she'd been a tad in her cups, her riotous laugh echoing across the chamber. He welcomed the smile, though knew it unusual for Brienne not to be more controlled with her emotions. Perhaps the years were softening her.

"Thank you," she acknowledged, "although much of the credit must go to the Westermen. Extraordinary soldiers, all of them. I am honoured to have commanded them."

"Aye, that they are. But you're owed much of the credit, too, and the way some tell it, most of it." She was shaking her head at that, so he added. "Even Ser Daven is speaking in admiring tones, and being a Lannister, he's not an easy man to impress."

“I appreciate the tales, although I suspect many of them are about ‘Brienne the Beauty’, and have as much truth to them as the name.”

She meant it lightly, but Davos was lost for words nonetheless, and must have looked it, because she held up a large hand, and flushed red.

“I’m sorry, Ser Davos, that kind of self-pity is not appropriate.”

Neither said anything for a moment, the mood broken. Davos watched Brienne bite her lip nervously. She knew something was up, beyond his discomfort at her self-deprecation.

"Would you like a seat?" She asked finally, indicating toward a collection of chairs near an unlit fire.

"Aye, thanks. These old bones aren't pleased by long periods of standing."

They made their way over to the fireplace and sat down. Brienne's chair creaked beneath her weight, which caused them both to smile a little. She really was a huge woman, and if anything the past months of trekking and fighting seemed to have further honed her figure. Even her face was muscled, a prominent tendon on the side of her jaw flexing as she pondered what to say. She was clenching and grinding her teeth.

"Why are you here, my Lord?" she asked, once they were settled. "I can only assume it is bad news..."

Good news, bad news, I know not what you will think, my lady, he thought.

"Brienne," he began to say slowly, then stopped. He needed to choose his words carefully. The several weeks he had spent on the boat, running over this conversation in his head, were proving to be of little use now. Usually he was good at talking, and he definitely recalled having come up with something appropriate as the waves had rocked and crashed against the hull. Yet in the quiet peacefulness of this room, words failed him. He looked up at Brienne's cautious but open face, and his heart clenched again at the thought of causing this honourable, kind lady even more pain.

Davos cursed Jaime Lannister, for being a fool, and then he cursed himself for being softhearted enough to save him.

But I saved him for her, didn't I? He thought. Why?
He knew the answer. *Because, for some reason that defies sense, she loves him. Surely, when I saved him, I must have assumed he would return to her? Or that she would still care for him? Why is this so bloody hard?*

He sighed deeply, started again. “Well, my lady, there is no purpose to be served by beating around the bush,” he clasped his hands together and drew a deep breath. "Jaime Lannister is alive."

At his words Brienne took a short, sudden intake of breath, almost a gasp. Her lips parted and her eyes widened. For a moment Davos thought he could see the subtle glistening of water forming above her lashes, but she blinked the tears away immediately, and drew an second, almost imperceptible breath to steady herself. Her self-control was remarkable.

"Oh..." She said weakly. She swallowed. "Um, how?"

"He was grievously injured when the keep fell, my lady, and required significant care. It was uncertain whether he would survive, and by the time it became clear that he would, it was too dangerous for that knowledge to be put about. As you will recall, in the weeks after the terror, Lord Tyrion was awaiting trial for releasing Ser Jaime from custody, and we were concerned that if it got out that he was alive, the consequences for his brother would have been even worse. So we hid him."

"We?"

"Myself and the lady Arya."

Brienne blinked, uncomprehending. "Arya Stark?"

Davos nodded. Sometimes he couldn't believe it either.

She looked up and fixed him with her clear blue eyes.

"If I may explain ..." he began.

She stood up suddenly at that, turned away before he could begin, waving her hand at him gently. He gave her a moment as she walked deliberately over to the table at the back of the room, where the wine was laid out. She picked up the decanter and stared at it.

"I, um..." She shook her head, words failing her too now.

Davos watched as she poured herself a cup, and then, after a moment, poured an additional one. She turned, held it out to him. He nodded, so she walked back over and passed it to him. Her hand was shaking, and her face had lost all its newfound colour. Davos grew suddenly concerned that his Lord Commander might actually swoon, and there was no bloody way his doddering muscles would be able to catch her if she fainted.

"Please, Brienne, sit," he indicated to the chair, a little urgently.

Fortunately, she took his advice, and almost collapsed into it. She drew another long, shaky breath and took a sip of the wine, clearly trying to steady herself.

"Is he..." she paused, clearly trying to find the words. "Is he well?"

"He survived to leave my care, shortly before the Great Council," Davos said carefully. "I do not know how he is now, only that when we left him, he was perhaps not 'well', but was at no risk of dying."
"Before the Great Council." She whispered the words, putting the pieces together in her head.

Davos dropped his gaze to the floor, unable to meet her eyes. Yes, Brienne, he thought, I knew he was alive when I saw you last, when I spoke to you about the kingsguard vows, and why we changed them. I wanted to tell you, surely you see that now, but I couldn't. Couldn't because the Jaime he had rescued was heading north with his sister, bound for Pentos or Essos, likely to never see Westeros again. But of course I should have known that a Lannister would do whatever he wanted, sod the advice of others.

But he couldn't bring himself to say it. Instead he said, “I’m sorry.”

Brienne bit her lip again. It was red and swollen and would soon, if this kept up, be bloody.

"Where did he go?" She asked.

Davis sighed. "Now that is the question. We had arranged for his passage to Pentos. Yes," he caught her accusing look, "yes, the idea was for him to leave Westeros, and start again somewhere else. But he never got on the ship. We believe he passed through the Crownlands."

Davos paused, and this time he did meet Brienne's eyes. He needed to offer support. "He was with his sister."

At the mention of Cersei, the glimmer of something hopeful in Brienne's eye appeared to die. If possible, she went even paler.

"Oh, she survived too?"

"Aye, but she was much worse. She was dying, of that there was no doubt. Ser Jaime was ... well, he was determined to care for her until she passed. We didn't know how long that would be, but it was weeks or maybe months, at most. Likely much less."

"I see. Of course."

Brienne raised the cup of wine to her lips, and then drank the entirety of its contents in a couple of gulps. She coughed violently from the shock of it. Davos had to resist the urge to reach over and pat her on the back, as he remembered doing to his son, when he was young and choking on seawater. Wouldn't make any difference through the breastplate anyway, he told himself.

Davos eyed Brienne sadly. "That's one reason we didn't tell you, my lady. He had other obligations that he had to take care of." Please believe that we did not want to cause you more pain.

"Yes, of course," she repeated, tonelessly.

There was no disguising the tears now brimming in her eyes, and except for looking up and away from him, she didn't try.

How did Lannister, of all people, have this effect on the woman who fought undead, bandits, the Hound and a bear? The woman who kept Tyrion and Bronn in line on the small council and just brought peace to the Riverlands? It was beyond him.

Davos loved his wife Marya just fine. She was clever and hardworking, had given a son and overlooked his business affairs most admirably. He made sure she was well provided for, worried for her welfare and would mourn if she predeceased him. Yet she did not preoccupy his thoughts, and he was not like to do stupid things for the love of her. She would not be impressed if he did.
Love and duty were as one for Davos. But Lannister? The man had done stupid thing after stupid thing for the people he loved. Jon Snow was inclined to the same insanity, although he at least perhaps overcame it in the end. King Robert and Rhaeger had torn a kingdom apart over Lyanna Stark. Even Brienne, who he considered among the most sensible people he had ever met, seemed to have a romantic heart and have lost her reason to it, loving a man who truly did not deserve her.

*Love is the death of duty,* Tyrion had said. But to Davos, it also seemed to be the death of common sense. He wondered what it would be like to feel such depth of passion that one acted like his friends did. He was glad he never had.

Brienne needed a few moments to compose herself, and Davos gave them to her gracefully. When she could talk again, she asked: "Why tell me now? Why not earlier?"

Davos considered. "He asked after you, Brienne, when he first woke, but we didn't tell him anything. We didn't want to tell tales about you, especially not to him, no matter when he asked. But as for why we are telling you now and not before? Jaime was seen and recognised. Alive. We have confirmed that he saved some farmers and a merchant from Dothraki raiders, and there are wilder tales too. We're looking for him, for them, but thought it possible rumours would reach your ears before we find him. I didn't want you to hear it from someone else. I ... well, I thought it was my duty to explain." He grinned ruefully. "And so did Tyrion, once he moved past his urge to hang me."

Brienne was looking down at her empty cup, fingers tracing the rim. She nodded almost imperceptibly.

"We were also, maybe, wondering if you knew where he might be," Davos added cautiously.

She looked up. "Why?"

"Because if he's alive, we need to find him, before someone else does."

She gave some thought to that. “I ... don't know."

Davos nodded. He wasn't entirely he believed her, but he let it go. "Lord Commander - Brienne. Do you wish to go and search for Ser Jaime?"

She started at that, surprise and then an undisguised, intense desire washing across her face. "I..."

Yes, Davos realised. *She does, possibly more than anything else, but she's going to be too bloody strong to admit it."

Confirming his suspicions, Brienne drew another breath and said, evenly, "I could no more go to him now than I could have followed him to Kings Landing when he left Winterfell. My duty is here, with my men."

"You will shortly be discharged of that obligation," Davos said. "I have directions from the King. You are entitled to a leave of absence if you wish."

He watched that thought play across her face for a moment. Intense longing, pain, fear. Then that same determination.

"No," she said, shakily. Followed by, more firmly, "No, thank you Ser Davos. I don't need a leave of absence. My men will return to the Westerlands soon, and I will accompany them before returning to Kings Landing to resume my duties as Lord Commander."
Davos watched her carefully, but she had composed herself so well he could no longer read her expression, other than that admirable determination.

He had been mistaken about her, moments ago, he realised. Love was not the death of duty for Brienne, not when she was determined that it not be. No, for Brienne, duty could be the death of sense. She seemed determined to make herself miserable.

He watched as she stood up. “I may have more questions for you, Ser Davos, but I need ...” she paused, struggling for words, a slight tremor betraying her resolve. "I need to get back to work. Please, make yourself comfortable. I'll see you at dinner. Good evening, Ser Davos."

And with that, the conversation was over, and she turned and left, leaving Davos holding his half-empty wine glass, staring into the empty doorway.

"What the fuck have I done."

Brienne

*Jaime is alive.*

*Alive.*

Brienne toyed with the words in her head as she stumbled to her chambers. Turned them, examined them, picked them apart, tried to work out how she felt. Her mind was a tangle of emotions, and an all too familiar terrible, horrible longing had been rekindled in her chest.

She had thought this was over. Had made her vows, done her duty to Jaime in the white book, moved on. *I was content, I was surviving.* But now she had hope. Hope that may be dashed.

*I cannot bear to be crushed like that. Not again.*

But he was alive.

*Alive, alive, alive.*

Alive, but not with her. With Cersei instead. Where he feels he belongs.

The old Brienne, the Brienne of awkward meetings, failed betrothals, Renly's camp, the dance, would have believed herself at fault. She would have convinced herself she meant nothing to Jaime, that he had merely shown sympathy to her ugly, unloved and unlovable self. That he could never love her when compared to the beautiful and passionate Cersei. But she no longer believed that. Jaime had *seen* her, knew how she acted and what people thought of her, how she was mocked and derided, and he had still fought beside her, stood beside her and eaten with her, knighted her, and ignored just about everyone else at Winterfell to be with her. He'd known what she looked like too, had touched the scares on her body, run his hands through her short hair, kissed her small breasts and clung to her broad thighs hard enough to leave marks. *He had loved me, in his own way, despite my difference. He did not care how I looked, no more than he did Tyrion.*

As he had plainly told her, in the Winterfell courtyard, on that terrible night, he hadn't left because she had done anything wrong. He and demons and his obsession with Cersei had dragged him back into the darkness.
You've died for her now, Jaime. How much more can you feel you owe her?

She did not want to confront the likely answer - the rest of his sister's now borrowed life, if not more.

Brienne closed the door to her chambers and leaned against it, before sinking to the floor. In the privacy of her own rooms, she let the tears fall.

She had not told Davos the full truth. She suspected she knew where Jaime was, or at least where he had been. If he was with Cersei, and if she was as injured as Davos said, then he would wish to help her, and the only place he could do that was the Quiet Isle. They would help him, and maybe also her. It was not a secret place, but obscure, and few would think to look. Few find it, unless they need it, the legends say, and if anyone needs it, Jaime does. She hoped he had gone there. He would be safe. And the idea of Queen Cersei, brave and proud, being confined to one of those simple women's huts was almost enough to make her laugh despite the tears. Did she lay her golden head on a hessian sack, bath in the cold waters of the Bay, empty her ceramic chamber pot on the common pit? Did she even live? Davos had thought her to be dying, but the Isle had competent healers. With help, perhaps she would survive? Brienne felt little guilt in hoping she did not. I cannot pray to the Seven that she dies, that would be too much. But I cannot stop myself hoping that she does, anymore than I can quash the hope that Jaime one day breaks free.

There is always hope, as wrong as it is to hope for it.

The Quiet Isle was, she supposed, a source of hope. The Elder Brother with his calm words, and frank admission of his own failings. Jaime may listen to him, accept that he is a good man. Get over himself.

Brienne remembered, then, lying in bed with Jaime, arms and legs entwined, telling him about her sojourn with Pod, and how they tracked alternatively Sansa and Arya to the Bloody Gate and the Vale, and then north to Winterfell. She'd wound her fingers into the hair on his chest as she'd described the island, the vow of silence, and the Elder Brother.

"There is a man there, a former soldier, who fought for Rhaegar, nearly died, and was washed up on the shores. He considers himself reborn," she'd recounted, telling Jaime of the man's confessed sins and penance.

Jaime had watched her carefully, eyes studying her face. Had he thought I was asking something of him, suggesting something? She cannot remember why she had mentioned it, except that he had seemed so sad, so bewildered at times, so absorbed in his past, that she'd perhaps thought to share a successful story of another. If another of Rhaegar's men had been reborn, why not Jaime, if that is truely what wanted? He had looked intrigued.

"If only it were that easy," he had answered, after some thought, and no small amount of longing in his voice.

She wanted to ask him what he meant, what he wanted, what he thought he needed to do and how she could help him. But even more so, she had wanted to tell him she didn’t need him to change, that he was already honourable and good and she loved him as he was. But when she had tried, he'd kissed her instead, covered her body with his, and ensured they were done with talking.

The memory, like so many others, fills her body with heat, but this time it's less reassuring warmth than searing pain, setting alight the longing in her stomach and making it burn. Whatever his faults and burdens, however foolish, the truth was she missed him and wanted him still.
Her fingers moved, almost unconsciously, to Oathkeeper. She wore the blade at her side, always with her, always a source of strength when she was uncertain. Jaime was the first to truly trust her, and the blade was a reminder of that faith. Now it linked her to both Jaime and Pod. At Winterfell she had harboured silly little dreams about the three of them being a kind of family, and while that fantasy had faded (for now), the swords would always be an echo of it.

*If I want it, I should go get it* she thought.

She'd lied to Davos about that, too. A large, oddly rebellious part of her did want to go and find Jaime, duty be damned. *I could just go do it,* she thought. She could get on a horse, head west to the Kings Road, canter down toward the Bay of Crabs and Maidenpool and start looking for him. But what if she found him, and he did not want her to? If he wasn’t ready? If he had changed his mind? Another, wiser part of her, the self-protective part, the part that couldn't bear to be hurt again, wanted to run in the opposite direction, north to Moat Caillin, to Winterfell, to Sansa and a cold fierce enough to freeze her heart and slow her blood. She could pretend she had never heard this news, commit to never thinking of it. For surely Jaime Lannister would never go north again?

Two equal forces, fight for him or fly from him, tearing at her recently repaired soul. Both unbearable. No, she decided, she would give into neither. She would not run to Jaime, nor from him. She would do her duty, wait, and see whether he made his way back to her. *He left me. If he wants me again, he can come and get me. He's done it before, he can do it again. When he’s ready.*

And if he didn’t, ever? She couldn’t deny the thought of that hurt. But that would prove she was mistaken about what they meant to each other. Or that whatever they had really had died, and she just needed to accept it. Or perhaps that he was just too far gone from her, and nothing she could do would bring him back. If so, she would steel her heart, and live with that, and maybe it would be for the best.

Until then, she had that hope, that horrible, desperate, terrible hope that he would come back to her. And maybe, just maybe, he'd be waiting for her, at Kings Landing, or Casterly Rock.

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**Jaime**

King Bran.

King Fucking Bran.

The words just didn't seem to want to sink into his muddled mind. The news was so strange, so unbelievable, that Jaime wondered if maybe he was dead, and confined to one of the Seven Hells. Or perhaps he was still unconscious, and trapped in a long, painful fever dream, complete with near death experiences, old friends, random acts of violence and the boy who caught him fucking Cersei becoming king. No doubt a maester could find some messed up symbolism in that.

But no, he was too tried, hungry and handless for this to be a dream. He also wasn’t that imaginative. *Only life could be this fucking ridiculous.* No, he would need to come to terms with the fact that the boy he'd crippled was now a king. The king. A king who knew his greatest evils, his deepest sins. A king who had, as a boy, protected him only because he was useful, and who had made no promises to do so in the future. What possible penance could he do to move past this? He would surely be executed now. And given everything that had happened since his last apparent death, that would be bloody frustrating.
Jaime had heard the news about Bran upon arriving in Maidenpool. The town was still something of a mess, with patched-up homes and loose rocks piled to fill holes in the pink stone walls, but it had the bustling feel of a place on the mend. The old cart he rode in on, while a hindrance of the road, was a great help in getting past the gates. He'd told the guards he intended to trade it, and the tools in it, and on the basis of that promise, he'd been beckoned in with barely a second glance.

As soon as he was inside the town, true to his word, he had headed to the stables to sell the cart and trade the horse for one better suited to riding. The stablemaster had been a talkative enough man, eager to share the gossip he had heard about the changed situation in Kings Landing.

"Aye," he'd said, "yeh heard me right, friend. King Bran the Broken. Although they all says the Imps's the real power. Made the Dragon Queen go mad, brought a tower down on his sister and seized the throne through a cripple. Not doin' too bad a job, though, eh?"

Jaime found it amusing that Tyrion was getting the credit for Cersei’s death. His brother would love that.

"And what do they say of the old queen?" he had asked, unable to resist.

"Cersei? They're like to say all kinds of thing 'bout her and her brother, but folks around 'ere say they survived, and the kingslayers livin' in those there woods, killing them what fought for the Dragon Queen's army."

Jaime couldn't help a bark of laughter at that, but the old man had only eyed him menacingly.

"Met at least one pair who saw 'im themselves, I 'ave," He said defensively, as if his role of town gossip monger was under attack. "Farmfolk. Not like to lie, especially not to me."

No one in their right mind would tell you the truth about anything, he thought. But he had pulled his hood up and kept a better watch after that. It wouldn't serve to be recognised.

Jaime now pondered what to do, as he sold the remainder of his goods at the local smithy by the walls. He could still run. The Maidenpool docks were busy enough, and no doubt there was a boat to Essos. He could disappear more effectively now without the burden of Cersei, blend in with the flood of former soldiers and refugees leaving Westeros. He could find work doing something - what? - suitable to a one-armed man, and then drink himself to death in a filthy hovel, leaving his body to that rats. It wasn't as unappealing as it should have been. In that moment, it actually seemed much easier than going back to Kings Landing and facing the music there.

But what would be the point of it? Live miserably, die miserably, and the effort Davos put into saving him would be wasted.

And I would never see Brienne again.

Strangely, that thought was more terrible than the prospect of accounting for his mistakes before the strange new king.

But will she wish to see me again? Or will she reject me, tell me to piss off back to the lowest layers of the Seven Hells? Jaime couldn't even decide which of the possibilities he felt worse about - that, despite everything he had done, Brienne would welcome back her crippled, battered old oathbreaker (for why would she, other than desperation? or pity?) or that she would send him on his way. He knew with perfect clarity that the second course was better for Brienne, yet he fervently hoped for the first.

His business finished, he thanked the smith absently and collected the handful of silver stags
offered. He’d likely been cheated, but as he had no idea how much any of those things usually sold for, he had no way to check, and he honestly didn't really care. He made his way toward the market square.

Brienne. Even thinking her name made him ache with pleasure and longing and guilt and pain. He wondered where she was and what she was doing. At Winterfell, probably, with Sansa. Who hates me. Not without reason, he reminded himself. Even if she is my goodsister. Or was. Did her and Tyrion ever get that annulment? Gods, everything was confusing. He’d always relied on Cersei to keep up with that kind of thing. He didn’t want to think about her.

He imagined riding to Winterfell, again. He hated the north, but he’d go there for Brienne. He had been honest when he had told her he’d stay there for her too, meaning it at the time he said it. Before everything, and everyone, went south.

What would I say to her if I found her there now? He wondered. “I'm really sorry I wasn't more honest with you?”, “I was a fool? Please just give me another chance?” Didn't that almost go without saying? How about “since leaving you and returning to my sister-lover and then dying, I've realised I was wrong when I said I wasn't worthy of you”?

If he tried that, she’d probably just gut him.

Or perhaps she wouldn't. This was Brienne, after all. Harsh and judgmental at times, but kind-hearted too. Maybe she had understood why he had to go? The gods must know he had tried to tell her, even if he had done so badly, and she had been in no real state to listen.

Maybe she would listen now, allow him to explain? Would he be able to do it? To explain? He wasn’t sure anyone, even Brienne, could really understand what had been between him and Cersei. That only they could understand it was part of what bound them together. Still, even if she listened, even if he could make her understand, she was unlikely to be as welcoming again, or as trusting. That innocent idealism was probably gone forever.

And what could he offer her, anyway, other than his assurance that his devotion was no longer divided? It should never have been divided to begin with. He had no lands, titles, wealth or even purpose anymore. If he had not been the fighter he used to be at Winterfell, he was barely a fighter at all now. Perhaps he could win her by offering to serve under her again, just as he did the first time he’d pledged himself to her. But even thinking of that conversation - conjuring the words serving under her - brought up memories of the other ways he had done just that. It was immediately distracting. He had no right, no right at all, to such memories. He shoved them away. If he made that offer, the way he made it would have to change, lest she gut him for that too.

No, if he was going to make an offer to her, he needed to have something worth offering, even if it was just the assurance that he was at least something like the man she thought he was.

Lost in thought, Jaime almost missed the flash of unexpected movement to his left. Four decades of training ensured that he still quick enough to avoid the brunt of the fist flying toward his face, but he was not so fast as to completely dodge it, managing only to turn his head and absorb some of its sting. The fist still cracked across his jaw, and he staggered back, tasting blood in his mouth where his cheek snagged his teeth.

"Sisterfucking murderer!" yelled the fist's owner.

Jaime looked up, trying to focus his eyes. Either he was seriously concussed, or there were three men advancing on him. He shook his head and looked again. Still three. Great. Why did his enemies always run in packs? He tried to clear his mind and focus on a way out of this.
"You must have mistaken me for someone else..." he began, but the three continued to advance on him without any hesitation. Clearly they knew who he was, so no point wasting time with useless deceptions.

"I'd know you anywhere kingslayer!" confirmed the fist's owner, a big, tall boy with the long, lean face and grey eyes of the north.

"There's a bounty of your head, and we're gonna collect," slurred a second. This one was older, swaying, his nose was red.

A bounty. Of course there is. Jaime wondered who had the time and money to put one out on him, a man allegedly dead for months. The Tullys? Someone from Dorne? The Karstarks - were there even any of them left alive? Sansa? He wouldn't put it past Sansa, especially if Brienne was really pissed. King Bran? Who the hell knew. Whatever the source, the last thing he wanted right now was an attention-attracting brawl, particularly not one where he was outnumbered.

Three against one in close quarters. A walkover before his maiming, but a tough fight now. At fists, he would surely lose. With a sword he may do better, but he had no armor or shield. He didn't even have the gold hand. He put his left hand on his sword hilt and stepped back, trying to put some space between himself and his assailants. The three thugs spread out around him. Not amateurs then. He quickly surveyed the area. An alley. Everyone in it, whether merchants or housewives, had stopped what they were doing to watch, albeit from a safe distance. Some looked fearful, others intrigued, a few were near salivating over the thought of blood. No doubt they heard the allegation - kingslayer. It still rang in the air.

The third assailant, a skinny fellow with stringy black hair and a half-starved look, grinned maliciously as he approached from Jaime's flank. He already had a dagger in his hand and a gleam in his eye. That one likes a good stabbing, Jaime thought. Maybe I'll give him one.

Fist, Drunk and Skinny, he named them. They all looked reasonably competent, but attacking him in broad daylight in the middle of town and close to the main square indicated they were ether very stupid, or above consequences. He could only hope it was the former.

He decided to try bluffing.

"You're in the middle of the town, dimwits, you'll be arrested before you get anywhere near me."

Fist leered at him. "Thought you liked street brawls Lannister? Or is that only when you have the spears and numbers?"

What? Fist's taunt implied a certain familiarity, but Jaime couldn't place it. When did he last street brawl? When had he ever street brawl? Ned Stark?

"No one's gonna come to your rescue, sisterfucker," said Skinny, advancing as well. "Not here."

Probably not, Jaime silently agreed. Someone must have recognised him and tipped these fellows off. Perhaps the gossipy stablemaster. Well, this is what comes of letting those farmfolk live. If Cersei were here, she'd be gloating.

The lack of cover made this worse than the dothraki, but he had no one to protect but himself. For about the first time in his life, Jaime actually contemplated running - when have you ever run from a fight? Fuck, why was he reminiscing? Unbidden, the guilt hit him too. Now? What in the seven hells was wrong with him?

He tried to focus. To get away, he'd need to go through the assembled crowd, and if they had
heard who he was, as they surely must have, he wouldn't get far without further challenges. Challenges that could get messy. He didn't particularly want to have to kill smallfolk to escape. He wondered, passingly, if there was ever a time when he wouldn't have have cared about that, but he couldn't answer. He never used to get into these situations.

Running was probably out. That left staying to fight. He drew his sword.

The sound of his weapon being unsheathed echoed through the alley. He heard several women cry out, and someone called for the guards.

"Good. Get the fucking guards. I'm under attack," he yelled. He looked back to his attackers.

"So, who's first?"

He'd hoped to encourage a brave one to leap in alone, but they weren't as stupid as they looked. All three had now drawn their blades and continued their methodical approach. This was not going to plan.

Jaime brandished his blade as dramatically as he could, and backed around, trying to keep a wall, and not the crowd, behind him. Another thug was want to come from the crowd and have a go at him from behind.

"So, what's the bounty?" he asked as jovially as he could, trying for false bravado. "Surely, if I am who you think I am, I can simply pay you more."

"No one in his right mind would trust a lying oathbreaker like you to ever pay it," said Drunk, lunging clumsily. Jaime easily stepped out of way, twisting his blade and slamming the pommel into the man's shoulder as he did. Drunk's collar bone snapped and he cried out in pain, eliciting an excited gasp from the crowd. Nice to know he was providing the afternoon's entertainment.

"Next time it's the sharp side," Jaime warned, kicking Drunk in the balls for good measure, and then turning back to face other two.

"I'm not doing this for gold," claimed Fist. He and Skinny advanced, blades out, as Drunk stumbled back into position too.

"If you're doing it for love, I assure you I'm not worth it..."

Fist roared and swept his blade. The taunt had worked. The attack was too angry, too high and wide, and Jaime easily blocked, but he was unable to attack, and he barely dodged the following thrust from Skinny's long dagger. He was already breathing heavily. This could not end well. Fleeing suddenly looked even more attractive, and he wondered if he could simply shove people out of the way and make the gates. With my leg and guts the way they are, probably not.

Then a commanding voice echoed across the square.

"Heward, you idiot, back off now. You're meant to keep the King's peace, not wreck it!"

Fist - Heward, presumably - cast a quick look behind him, then turned red when he saw who was speaking. He took a step back from Jaime.

A tall man with brown hair, a cleft chin and a crooked nose, wearing a good quality suit of chain, approached, flanked by two more men. He appeared to be a guard, and a senior one, perhaps even a captain. He fixed Heward with a firm glare, "Get out of here, boy, before you spend a day cleaning out the privies." The boy didn't need to be told twice, scampering away.
"Fucking crazy northerners," the guard captain muttered at the boy’s back. He turned and looked at the other two. "And as for you lot, get out of here before you spend a couple more days in the stocks."

Jaime watched the men slink away. He sheathed his blade, and nodded to the captain. "Thank you."

The man snorted. He looked Jaime up and down, as he would a horse offered for sale. "Ser Jaime Lannister," he said, sardonically. "You look surprisingly alive for a man who had a tower fall on him."

Jaime didn't reply, but all things considered, he probably didn't need to. Everyone in the street had heard the accusation and seen him not deny it.

"Although you don't quite live up to your reputation with a blade."

Jaime shrugged. "You're really not meeting me at my best."

"No doubt we've all had better days," the captain agreed.

The captain approached, and it was then Jaime noticed what the man had draped across his shoulders. "You're a gold cloak. What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you. Rumors have been flying for months that you're alive. Our Lord Commander assured us that if you were, you wouldn't be able to keep a low profile for long. Looks like he was right. We've come to escort you back to the city."

Jaime narrowed his eyes. **Too convenient.** "I thank him for his consideration, but I can get there myself."

He started to leave, but the gold cloak stepped closer, blade drawn. "Oh, we really must insist."

Jaime appraised the man. He looked competent enough, rather surprising for a city watchman. He groaned, but acquiesced. Given the number of people who were apparently trying to kill him, an armed escort to the Kings Landing wasn't the worst idea.

"Well, seeing I'm heading your way anyway," he shrugged.

They took the main road from Maidenpool to Duskendale and then south. The men didn't deign to talk to him much, but they were not unkind, which made this journey through the Riverlands as a prisoner significantly less unpleasant than the previous two. The Commander, a man named Ser Hyle Hunt, more than made up for his men’s silence. He explained that he had first been sworn to Renly, and then Joffrey, and probably then to Cersei, but had in reality spent most of the war guarding a gate at Maidenpool.

"When Commander Marbrand sent some men north to recruit for the gold cloaks, I signed on up. Got a commission due to my name and knighthood, fancy armor and new weapons, but then they sent me right back to Maidenpool to look for you. I thought they were mad - what would the Kingslayer be doing up there? But here you are. Should be a promotion in this for me, as long as we get you back without getting you killed. You have got to be about the least popular person in the six kingdoms."

"Six?" Jaime had asked, ignoring the rest of the barb. **Who knows, with Cersei, Varys, Littlefinger and Daenerys all dead, it's possibly even true.**

A independent north. He wondered if that meant Sansa was queen. Wouldn’t that be fabulous, two kings that hate me.

Hyle was chatty, but Jaime had no idea how credible he was. Tyrion, the crafty little bastard, really did seem to have come out on top, but Bronn getting Hightower and the Reach and a place on the Small Council seemed rather unbelievable, promises made under duress notwithstanding. Olenna was like to rise from the dead as a white walker to fix things if that were true.

A few evenings in, and after a considerable amount of roundabout questioning, Jaime expressly asked Hyle about Brienne. The other knight had fixed him with a suspicious look when confronted with the question.

"Why ask me?"

"Because you might know," Jaime replied, drolly.

Hyle snorted, but settled himself down across the fire from Jaime. When he answered, his tone was mildly mocking. "There’s all kinds of talk about the kingslayer and the maiden not-so-fair. Some of it includes that she's no longer a maid, courtesy of you."

Jaime looked up fiercely. "Who's saying such things?"

He’d wondered how far news of their relationship had spread. They had been far too indiscreet at Winterfell, thinking themselves at the end of the world, forgetting that many of the people there with them were like to return to its center, and carry their gossip along with them.

"Everyone is saying such things," Hyle said. “Tell is it was so cold up north the even great Jamie Lannister, the man who would touch no one but his sister, was forced to seek comfort in the arms of the great sow of Tar-"

He never finished. Quick as lightening, Jaime leaped across the fire, left hand rising to strike Hyle across the mouth. There was a satisfying ‘crack’, and the other knight fell backwards, over the log.

"You are speaking of a highborn lady, ser. You'll not insult her!"

The sound of the punch and Ser Hyle's surprised cry drew the instant attention of the other men, who stood and moved aggressively to protect their captain. But, to his credit, Hyle only laughed, surprisingly good-naturedly, and waived at his men to sit down. They did, reluctantly, watching as their captain picked himself back up and sat again on the log.

Jaime continued to stand, shaking, trying to get a hold of his temper.

"Ah well, I guess it's true then." Ser Hyle grinned, his teeth covered in blood. "Good for her. Turns out she did better than any of us."

Jaime glowered. "I don't think I want to know what you're speaking of."

"And I certainly don't intend to tell you," Hyle dabbed at the cut on his lip tentatively. “But I'm actually rather pleased to know Brienne the Beauty managed to find someone.”

Jaime ground his teeth. He knew something of Brienne’s past, the parts of it she had confided in him during their long nights together, when relaxed and well pleasured, she’d been occasionally talkative. She’d told him of the japes, the mockery, the cruel games and humiliation. She’d shared
with him her belief no one would ever want her, her initial disbelief that he did. Gods, he still hoped that wasn’t what she had thought when he left her. But no doubt it was. He felt an anger, borne of guilt, rise within him. This man had been part of one of those games. The dance, perhaps, or something worse. Jaime had an intense urge to give Hyle another kick in the teeth, but he resisted. He wasn’t that man anymore. A shame. Erasing that stupid smirk might have made him feel a little better. Now he had to live with the guilt. What was it Tyrion had said? The perils of self betterment?

Still, there were other ways to defend Brienne’s honour.

“I’m hers if she’ll have me,” he said simply.

"I suppose I won't get invited to the wedding feast?” Hyle asked, but with a bloodied smile.

"What are you talking about?” Jaime asked. Then, quickly, “what do you know?”

"Everyone's knows you were meant to be wed, if that’s what you’re asking. When word came that you were alive, some were joking that you were in hiding to get out of it, but my lip and loose tooth and that murderous expression on your face suggest that's not the case."

Jaime didn't respond immediately, but instead settled back by the fire. Meant to be wed. He wondered who put that rumor around, and how far it had gone. He wondered what Brienne thought of it, too. Hopefully, she wasn't too repulsed. Hopefully it had saved her reputation.

_Hopefully she wants it to be true._

At the very least, she didn’t appear to have denied it.

_Hope._ It was a wonderful thing. He hadn’t touched wine in days, but he felt drunk on the possibilities.

"If anyone wants out of this wedding, it won't be me," he said firmly.

Hyle raised an eyebrow, and Jaime stared back, daring him offer a snide remark. He didn't. Finally, Jaime looked away from Hyle to stare into the flames.

No doubt, he was smiling like an idiot.

Let them laugh.
Duty and honour

Chapter Notes

Well, this turned out to be a much longer chapter than I anticipated. I ended up ‘cutting’ two scenes which fit better next chapter, so this is all Jaime. They are getting there :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JAIME

Kings Landing

Two days after the fireside chat, they made the outskirts Kings Landing.

Ser Hyle had warned Jaime about the state of the city - "what's left of it" - in typically glib tones. It had suffered the ravages of dragon fire, wildfire, rampaging northern and Essosi soldiers, and then looting by its citizens. “People say your father's sack was a friendly tourney frolic by comparison,” Hyle said, with the kind of awed amazement that only a stranger to the city could feel at its destruction. Jaime barely resisted the urge to punch him again. As much as he had often loathed the city, and avoided most parts of it, Kings Landing was as close to a home as he had. And now it was cinders and sludge.

The thought of the dragon fire that burnt it made his stomach churn, and he wondered if he was beginning to develop the same fear of fire as the Hound. Or maybe it was just a fear of dragons? A bloody well justified fear. Although he would never admit it to anyone (well, maybe Brienne) he was still haunted by memories of the Gold Road - he could recall too easily, and in much too much detail, the roar of the dragon as it rose above the horizon, the rush of wind from its huge wings, the way it opened its mouth and showed off its disturbingly enormous teeth as he charged it. It was a creature of horror, leaving in its wake a fiery trail of screaming men, dancing while covered in flames or desperately trying to peel melted armour from their bodies. He could still almost smell the burnt hair and flesh, see the smoke and hear the terrified horses as the dragon attacked. He could absolutely recall the desolation and hopelessness he had felt as his army disintegrated around him.

In the aftermath of that battle, Jaime had began to see the open sky, once something he barely noticed, as a silent threat. The shadow of a heavy cloud or migrating birds could make his stomach jump and his hand tremble. Even months later, he'd panicked at the mere sound of Daenerys arriving at the Dragon Pit on her mount, and it had taken most of his willpower to act normally at Winterfell when the bloody dragons flew overhead.

Daenerys caressed them more tenderly than she did poor Jon Snow, he recollected with a shudder, picturing her gloved hand gliding along the black and green scales. I should have known from that she'd go bad.

Jaime had drawn upon the memories of blackened men and horses, runaway carts and wanton destruction, to prepare himself for Kings Landing. Still, nothing could compare to the reality of it. A feeling of desolation and unease sprouted in his guts as they made the outskirts, approaching the Iron Gate along a path of rubble, through barren soil littered with stumps. He remembered
standing on the same road years before, in what was then a sun-dappled forest, farewelling Brienne and Pod as they took up their quest to find Sansa. His lady knight had carried away with her the last shreds of his honour, along with his priceless sword. A part of him had never expected to see any of them (Brienne, honour, or sword) again. Yet she had survived, triumphed, and all three had found their way back to him at Riverrun, and then Winterfell.

Watching her leave, safe and inspired, was actually one of the better moments of that month, he thought darkly. It had been a bad time in the worst year of his life. Rejected by Cersei, disowned by his father, Joff dead, Tyrion facing execution, poor, bewildered Tommen forced onto the throne, and he a laughing stock of wasted muscles and empty sleeve. And to think I thought things couldn't get much worse. The ensuring years had proved him wrong, even on that.

His rumination on his own problems ceased when he saw the ruined towers of the Red Keep in the distance. They were not even red anymore, but black. Black like that bloody dragon. Drogon, that’s what she called it. Tyrion had told him it was named for some tattooed barbarian king, one of those dothraki horse lords who saw destruction as victory. Fitting, he thought. And, in hindsight, probably another sign Daenerys was going to go crazy. By Davos and Hyle’s accounts, the colossal black menace was still out there somewhere. Probably looking for a way to avenge its mother. Jaime anticipated a future of gazing up with a shudder at every dark overhead shadow.

As they drew closer to the city it became apparent that the walls had borne the brunt of the devastation. They had been patched with stone, rubble and wood, but were still ruined in other places. Men scurried along what appeared to be hastily erected scaffolding, repairing and replacing. Jaime spotted a tall, broad-shouldered gold cloak talking to a man in a slightly dusty white cloak while they watched the reconstruction of a segment of the wall. Kingsguard? He couldn't make out either man's face. His eyesight, like much of the rest of him, was beginning to fail with age.

Hyle led his men, and Jaime, to what remained of the Iron Gate, where another gold cloak stood watch. This one wore the re-purposed, ill-fitting armour typical of a new appointment, and Jaime couldn’t help but think that he looked about twelve. Hyle and the guard exchanged a few quick words, and the gold cloak looked them over, giving Jaime a particularly scrutinising appraisal before beckoning them through. Jaime gave the kid a menacing look in return, and he blanched. Good to know he could still scare someone, even if it was a green recruit in oversized armour who’d probably heard he slew kings for pleasure.

"So what are you going to do with me now I'm here? Dump me in the Black Cells?" He asked Hyle as they passed into the city.

"Perhaps. I have only been instructed to take you straight to the Red Keep. I'm advised they’re expecting you. In any case, once I get you to the Keep, you’re someone else's problem."

“They’re expecting me? How can they be ‘expecting me’?" To the best of Jaime’s knowledge, Hyle had sent neither raven nor rider.

“You’ll need to get use to King Brandon the Broken and his weird ways.”

Jaime couldn’t think of anything clever to say in response to that.

Ser Hyle led him through the ruined streets, familiar yet not. Many buildings were still ash-covered husks, but there were signs of reconstruction - canvasses strung across buildings as makeshift roofs, merchants with baskets of wares for sale, linen slung to make walls. Still, it was depressing that he didn't save the city when he slew Aerys, but merely delayed its destruction. Preserved it for his far more effective daughter. He'd long considered kingslaying his greatest act,
the secret deed that fueled his inner righteousness, the balm for his many failings. But now? Did he still think it was worth it? He looked around at the beleaguered small folk as they scuttled about their business, the lucky ones who had survived the devastation. He’d bought the older ones twenty years of life, less for the then-unborn and the aged. *Still, multiply that by half a million and that’s a lot of life.* A good and just person, like Brienne, would find pleasure in making such a fair bargain, so many lives in exchange for her honour and happiness, but Jaime felt only bitter and, frankly, thwarted. *Cheated.*

When they arrived as the gates to the Red Keep, another man dressed in white armour greeted them. He wore platemail with crow a motif, accessorised with a heavy gorget, oversized gloves, inconveniently long cloak and an overall gaudiness more suited to ceremony than battle. Only a member of the kingsguard would dress in such a ridiculous manner. Yet Jaime had no idea who the man was.

The unfamiliar kingsguard member looked him over, a slight look of distaste on this features. Brown hair, brown eyes, stupid dimwitted smile - he had the look of the Reach about him.

"Court is in session. The King is expecting you," he said, in a toffy Highgarden accent, confirming Jaime's suspicions. Some minor branch Tyrell, maybe, although he'd be surprised if there were many left of them. He’d seen to that.

*All my kingsguard are just as dead as the Tyrells,* Jaime thought numbly. Honest Balon Swann, brave Aeris Oakheart, incompetent Boros Blount, and that fuckwit Osmund Kettleblack. Unbidden, and very unwanted, a grotesque image of Kettleback's hairy arse pumping between Cersei's pale legs slithered into his mind. His stomach churned. Cersei betraying him with Lancel was disappointing, but he could deal with it. Fucking a Kettleback? Not only did that sting, it made him nauseous. The whole family was unsavoury. If nothing else, Cersei should have had better taste.

"Of course the king’s expecting us," Hyle grumbled sourly, as he beckoned for Jaime to follow the other knight. "Knows everything. Don't even get time for an ale and a girl, these days. Anyway, I’m off to collect my reward. Nice meeting you, kingslayer. Please give my regards to your betrothed. I’m sure she’ll remember me fondly."

Hyle winked at Jaime, who scowled in return. "You should hope she doesn’t remember you at all."

He watched Hyle leave, then gazed up at the ruin of Maeghar's Hold, and down to the stones at his feet. *I died here once already,* he thought morosely. *But I fucked it up, and now I'm back to do it properly.*

In something of a daze, Jaime was led up some stairs to the rebuilt greathall, the gold cloak and a couple of burly meatheads at his back. The doors to the throne room opened, and he blinked at the startling scene. The new king sat in a wheeled chair that was placed upon the raised dais that had once held the Iron Throne. He recalled Hyle saying the dragon had melted it. *How convenient,* given *King Bran apparently brings his own seat.*

Well, good riddance to the ugly chair with its vicious barbs and insidious ability to ruin lives. It still amazed him that Cersei hadn't died on the bloody thing. When searching through the Keep, he'd gone straight to the throne room, thinking to find her clinging to its iron blades as blood ran through her fingers and fire blazed around her. He'd been stunned to instead find her cowering in the map room, distressed and lost. If he had ever considered, even momentarily, doing anything other than saving her, those thoughts had vanished upon seeing the state she was. *Of course I came,* he’d assured her, drawing her into his arms. Terrible and horrible as she had become, in that moment he had been given a final glimpse of his Cersei, the girl she had been before the iron
throne consumed her, as it apparently had Daenerys too.

Jaime jumped at the sudden feel of steel on his back. As he tried to bring his thoughts back to the present he became acutely aware of where he was. The throne, the king, the room full of courtiers watching him, the lumbering armed guards at his heels. He'd been staring, frozen in place and lost in memory, and had forgotten to kneel before his new monarch. No doubt the many righteously unbending Stark loyalists watching were interpreting his daydreaming as some kind of insouciant defiance by the kingslayer.

"Ser Jaime," King Brandon Stark’s strange, monotone voice echoed through the throne room. "Do you come to bend the knee, to swear loyalty to the rightful king of the Six Kingdoms."

*Did he?* Did he accept King Brandon the Broken as king? The idea of the odd, snooping little boy as his lord was still disconcerting, but he was short on alternative options. In any case, Cersei was gone, and his children were gone, and he couldn't find it within himself to care who sat the throne instead of them. All he cared was that there be no more of this stupid war. If a Stark king could achieve peace, so be it, he’d bend the knee and back him.

"Yes, your Grace," he said, slowly. The words were thick on his tongue, but without the bitter taste that came with saying them to Robert. *At least this king isn't taking credit for my deeds,* he thought. It occurred to him then that the king probably already knew he’d say 'yes' to bending the knee, because otherwise he wouldn't have organised this public farce.

Jaime bent his knee, and lowered himself as gracefully as he could, given his damaged legs. His joints cracked, the cartilage grinding. He hoped the menacing lug of a guard looming behind him couldn't hear it, but feared it was so loud the whole hall did. He dropped his gaze and focused his eyes on the worn grey paving stones beneath his feet. He’d spent too much of his life staring at the floor in this room, pretending to be fascinated by the rivets and gouges (which were, truthfully, no less boring than most of the rest of what went on under Robert). Actually, he’d spent too much of his life in this room, period, whether pretending to look at the floor or pretending to watch someone being burned alive in their armor. Burnt, maimed, exiled, shamed, he’d seen men suffer it all in here. He fucking hated this room.

The seconds - minutes? - stretched on as he stared at the floor. He could hear the shuffling of feet, the ruffling of clothing, his guard's heavy breathing. What was the was the king waiting for? He tried to recall the bending the knee ceremony. Was he meant to say something now? In hindsight, he probably should have paid more attention during all those boring, glorified guard duties...

Finally, Brandon spoke. "Ser Jaime, do you swear to serve me, and the six kingdoms I rule, with honour and loyalty?"

Jaime ignored the guffaws at the mention of 'honour' and 'loyalty' in connection with him. He was practiced at pretending not to hear things, as well as not see them. Apparently even dying to protect his queen had not improved his reputation. Funny, how he was damned for killing a bad king, yet cursed for protecting a bad queen. But none of that was really Bran’s fault.

"I do, your Grace," he said evenly. What else could he do?

"Please rise then, Ser Jaime."

Jaime stood, painfully. He passingly recalled kneeling on a similar stone floor, as a boy really, the night he had taken his vows. He'd stayed there from sundown to sunrise, and his knees had been bloody by morning. *Yet I still found it easier to get up then than now.* He tried to ignore the sneering, the looks of pity and even disgust in the eyes of those who watched. *Yes, witness Jaime*
Jaime Lannister, son of the Great Tywin, former Lord Commander, brought humbled and low. Well, it wasn't the first time. He'd borne a year of humiliation in Robb Stark's camp, pissing and shitting in the open as wolves - literal and figurative - bayed around him. He’d suffered the embarrassment of Tommen removing him from the kingsguard, of having to strip his own cuirass from his chest, one-handed, while courtiers sniggered at his clumsiness. Heck, he’d tolerated two decades of "kingslayer", "oathbreaker", "sister-fucker" and "man without honour", said to his face and behind his back, and he’d not even killed a man over it. Of course it bothers me, he’d told his father. If he’d endured all that, he could endure this.

He just hoped Brienne wasn't here to see it.

Once he stood, he surveyed the room quickly, including the spectating crowd. Aerys’, Cersei’s and Robert’s royal courts had all been familiar places, every person known to him, at least until Cersei stopped holding court with Westerosi. But this one was full of strangers. So many men, and women, had died in the War of Five Kings that most of the great houses had been reduced to second sons of second sons or heirs through the female line, persons who would never have set foot in the throne room a decade ago. Many here were also so young they could have been his children.

I have lived too long, he thought. The world has moved on.

He glanced upwards, and to his immense relief he saw Tyrion. His brother stood alone on the second story balcony, watching him carefully. Their eyes met, and Tyrion nodded in Bran’s direction. The message was clear. I've fixed it. Behave, and you'll be alright. Jaime nodded, hoping that he could.

Jaime’s eyes swept back across the throne room, to the dais and the king he had broken. He was bemused to see Podrick Payne standing behind the chair, in the same position he had so frequently taken behind Cersei. The boy was a knight now, presumably, and a kingsguard. Good lad. He cut a fine figure in his white cloak and armour, decorated with those crown motives. Jaime had spent time training with Pod in Winterfell, and they had developed something of a friendship. He met Pod’s eyes, but the look he received back was savage and foreboding. He is not like to forgive me for what I did to Brienne.

Jaime wondered, again, where Brienne was, if Pod was here. They were inseparable, surely? Yet he could not see her.

"I, perhaps more than anyone, know who you are, and what you have done, Jaime Lannister," King Bran said calmly.

The king’s voice was amplified by the design of the room, but it was still hollow sounding, almost inhuman. Jaime was eerily reminded of a white walker. He chose not to dwell on that.

Jaime pulled his eyes back to rest on the King. "That you do," he acknowledged.

"The people know you as the Lord Commander to the former Queen Cersei and Kings Tommen and Joffrey, and then the Commander of the Lannister armies."

That at least was uncontroversial. “I can't deny that, your Grace. I wouldn't want to."

"Their opinion of you is not high."

Jaime shrugged. "I don't doubt it. I suspect it is very low indeed."

"You commanded the Lannister forces against Riverrun, against Highgarden, and against the
"As kingsguard? No. In that role I mainly just stood behind that throne, bored out of my mind while my feet went numb..." he began, before realizing that humour was probably lost on Brandon Stark, particularly when it was about numb feet and standing. "But, yes, I was later the commander of the Lannister forces. I took Riverrun without loss of life, and Highgarden with minimal casualties." He paused, and looked around. "Is this another trial? Because I've already had one of those, and two pardons too..."

"Not from me," Bran answered, surprisingly imperiously. It was the first emotion Jaime had heard from the boy since pushing him out that window.

"Think of it more as a confession..." came another, familiar voice. Jaime spun around to see Bronn standing off to the side, irritating smirk plastered across his pointy face. It was the same smirk he’d worn when he held that crossbow at the in outside Winterfell.

"What are you doing here, arsehole?" Jaime spat, without thinking. That elicited some shocked gasps from the crowd.

"That's Lord Areshole to you." Bronn’s smirk widened into his best shit-eating grin. "Your brother actually came through on his promise. At least one Lannister is good to his word."

Bronn. Of all the betrayals in his life, Bronn was among the most painful. Jaime had few real friends, but he had began to count Bronn as one. Stupid and naive, he'd been, and it still pissed him off that his long term second would sell him out to his sister. He felt his missing fingers clench, and for once he longed for the golden hand so he could smack Bronn across the mouth. A few fewer teeth would erase that self-satisfied smirk.

He shook his head, and with great effort, drew a calming breath and turned back to the King. No point starting a brawl in the throne room, particularly when I can't possibly win it.

"You know what, I can't be fucked with a world where a traitorous cunt that like gets ennobled," he said, bitterness surprising even himself. "If you're going to execute me, get it over with and spare me the drama."

So much for behaving.

The crowd gasped again, but Bran seemed completely unperturbed. He simply fixed him with that dull, vacant stare again. "Is there a reason I should execute you, Ser Jaime?" he asked, levelly.

"No doubt dozens. Of what am I accused this time?"

"Careful what you ask for, his Grace can list your sins one by one. Trust me, I know," Bronn warned.

Jaime ignored him.

"I would list your sins, if you wish it, Ser Jaime. I have seen every one of them, from your murder of Anton to what happened in the crypt."

Jaime shuddered, his gorge rising. "Why would I wish that?"

"I would present them as facts, without commentary. You may find, and I suspect you would, that the people here would be rather disappointed, for your actual failings are not quite so great as your rumored ones."
Jaime stared at King Brandon in sudden confusion. There was some disconcerted, even disappointed mumbling from the crowd.

"What?" he asked slowly, shaking his head.

But Bran ploughed on. "But let us start with a real one for which many here would like me to execute you, and for which others have tried. You slaughtered Ned Stark's men in the street."

Jaime ground his teeth.

"As I said at Winterfell, we were at war! Catelyn Stark had abducted my broth-" but he looked up at Tyrion, who shook his head vigorously. \textit{Not now}, Tyrion was telling him. \textit{Confess and move on}. Jaime relented, and shrugged. "I killed one, yes, and my men killed the others." \textit{Street brawling}, he thought. \textit{Perhaps that is streetbrawling}. His father had told him the incident was stupid and reckless, and maybe it was, but he felt no particular guilt for Ned Stark or his men, any more than Stark would have for him, or Catelyn would have for Tyrion.

"I killed hundreds of other men in battle too, thousands if you count those deaths under my control. In forests, mountains, plains and castles. Nameless, often faceless, sometimes pissing themselves with fear. Should I account for every one of those deaths as well, your Grace?"

"Should you?" Brandon asked evenly.

Jaime opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came to mind. War is war, he wanted to say. \textit{Do or die, kill or be killed, and I chose kill. I am no different to any other soldier in that regard, not even Brienne. I'm just much better at it than most.}

\textit{Brienne}. He thought then of the three Stark men she'd slain in that clearing outside the inn, while he stood chained beneath the tree, unable to do anything but watch. "Two quick deaths..." she'd said to the third bandit, as she killed him \textit{slowly}, the way he claimed to have murdered a serving girl. Even he had never done anything like \textit{that}. He had killed on the battlefield, had known of executions afterwards, but he had never pillaged or burned, and while he had doubtlessly been callously uncaring at times, he had never assaulted smallfolk. If he could indeed look into the past, King Bran must know that.

He turned his attention back to the king’s question.

"Even if I thought I should account, I can’t. Men die in battle, that’s the point of it. I am still here because I am - was - better at it than most. If I wasn't, I'd be dead, and you'd be having this conversation with someone else. And as for Stark? I was defending my house, my family, my brother. It was not something for which I can pretend to be sorry. Besides, Ned Stark was a sanctimonious hypocrite, and those are two things, at least, that I am not."

\textit{Yes, that’s right Jaime you idiot}, he thought to himself, even as he said the words, \textit{insult the King’s father}. He glanced up at Tyrion. Typically, his brother was glaring at him, shaking his head despondently. \textit{Yes, little brother, I am a fool. We are too much alike.}

But King Brandon Stark did not appear to take offence. He just continued to his impassive questioning.

"Defending your house, your family, the people you love. That is what is most important to you, is it not, Ser Jaime?"

He shrugged. "Yes."
“And as to your family, that included the former queen, and the children you sired on her?”

Gasps rippled across the room, followed by a nervous silence as the crowd awaited the answer. Of course, everyone knew it. They were all dissimulators, acting horrified while secretly loving the salaciousness of it all. Jaime contemplated for a moment what to say. For so long, his family had been his darkest secret, his children's lives teetering on a knife's edge, with any suspicion of their parentage a death sentence for all of them. His deepest fear had been that their heritage would come to light when he wasn't there to protect them, or failing that, to die with them. *I dreamed of finally holding my children as we died together,* he thought bitterly. *How fucked up was that?*

That fear had made him a dangerous man, a man who would, and did, do anything for Cersei, anything to get back to her, to protect her and their secret brood. Anything, including murdering his cousin and starting a war that tore the seven kingdoms asunder. Yet it had all been for nothing. They died anyway. So had Robert, Renly, Stannis, his father, Cersei, nearly everyone who would care now. His children's bodies were ashes, and could not be defiled further either. He was disgraced anyway. He had no one to protect, and nothing to gain from hiding this festering sore any longer. Yet, to admit it in public went against every instinct in his body.

Still, there was no point in hiding it, not from King Brandon, not the Court gossips who would spread the rumour anyway. What had Tyrion told him? *Own your weakness, wear it, and no one can use it to harm you. Well, fuck it. He was tired of lying.*

"Yes, I was Cersei's lover, and the father of her children." He announced, and it was a relief to say it openly, to hear the spurious gasps from a crowd pretending to be scandalized when they were riveted and delighted. "But I wasn't just her lover," he continued. "I loved her. I loved her with every inch of my being, from the time we were children. She was my life. I gave up everything for her - my family legacy, my titles, Casterly Rock and all its wealth, my honour, even a chance to be a father to my children. I did whatever she required of me, terrible things. You know that better than anyone, your Grace. I *was hers.*” He paused, took a breath, calmed himself, looked about at the fascinated faces, dared anyone to laugh. “Until, one day, I wasn't. Because I finally realised that the person who sat on that throne before you did, your Grace, was no longer the person I thought she was, if she ever was that person.”

Again he paused, and this time he looked straight at Pod. “And because I realised that I loved another.”

Pod looked down at the ground, his ears red.

The great hall was silent. At least the snickering had stopped.

Bran was still implacably motionless and unemotional. "And when you realised that, you left Cersei?"

"Yes." *Well, no, not immediately, and not easily, and never completely. Not until she died.* But he didn't want to get into that, not here. Not before these strangers.

“She betrayed you.” Bran continued. "After the meeting at the Dragon Pit  You spoke to her, spoke in favour of an alliance in order for the living to defeat the dead- "

“-she didn’t betray me, she disappointed me. I tried to talk to her, but she didn't listen. Not to me, and she only pretended to listen to Tyrion. Her promise to help was false. I told you this in Winterfell.”

“Yet you planned to keep that promise. You met with your men, made arrangements. And when
Queen Cersei determined not to honor her pledge, you rode north alone.”

He nodded. *Yes*. He could remember how excited he was, how *alive* he had felt at the prospect of being part of something bigger, of fighting for a just cause, a real enemy, monsters not men. To have a purpose again, a purpose that went beyond his sister’s ego. A purpose that would bring him back to Brienne. *Fuck loyalty,* she’d said. And so he had done just that, because Brienne had said he could. Because she had faith in him, as she always did.

*I came to Winterfell because of you.* That’s what he had planned to tell her. He’d practised saying it again and again on that long ride up. He almost did it, too, before he chickened out like some craven squire. He should have had the courage to say it to her, to declare it in the cold shadow of the Winterfell walls, in the mud and dust of that staging area. He should have kissed her and claimed her, too, in front of Podrick and the rest of the northmen and that stinking wildling. Then maybe, maybe, things would have been different.

*Or maybe not.*

Brandon still fixed him with those dull, dead eyes. “You stood on the walls of Winterfell, and fought the undead horde.”

"Yes."

"And you expected to die."

Yes, he thought. “I assumed there was no after.” *You as much as told me there wouldn't be.*

*You almost promised me.*

He had perhaps not anticipated dying immediately. He had expected days, weeks, months of battle as the end of the world, and their lives, approached. He had intended to spend that time with Tyrion and Brienne, knowing Cersei was safely back in Kings Landing, stewing in her own plots and hate while she waited to be the last queen standing. *I asked to fight under Brienne so I could die beside her, taking a blade in the flank or a blow to the head in place of her, but keeping her alive beyond my passing.* Never had he expected it to end so quickly. Never had he expected to live. Never had he contemplated an after where Brienne would be safe, and Cersei would be facing a violent death.

"That is not the first time you were prepared to throw your life away in battle.” King Bran continued. “During the Battle of the Gold Road, you charged the dragon single-handed, knowing you would die, but thinking to end the war?"

Jaime glanced up at Tyrion. His brother looked guilty. Had he known he would be with that baggage train? Jaime had never asked, perhaps did not want to know. “I had less hoped to die, than not even thought about it,” he answered truthfully.

Bronn had saved him, pulled him out the water, despite his plate armour. The sellsword had said it was for money, but Jaime hadn’t really believed him, at least until Winterfell. *I do now.*

The mood in the throne room had changed, Jaime could feel it. There were murmurs of admiration, as well as disdain. Still, he fixed his eyes on the dais, the king, not the audience.

"And yet, having fought the dead in Winterfell, having stood beside Ser Brienne, and your brother, when you heard of the Queen's crimes, and of the punishment she could no longer avoid, you chose to return to her service?”
"No!" he said, speaking before he thought. No, he assured himself. It was more complicated than that. He again looked around the room, his anger rising. This was too much, too personal. Why should he justify himself to these people, to this strange king? The crippled boy might be able to see what people did, but he couldn't possibly see into their souls and know why. Surely he was entitled to his secrets, and Cersei to her dignity? What was the point, anyway? As with Ned, after he killed Aerys, these people did not want to hear the truth. They would not believe him. It would not matter.

Except that it matters to Brienne, he realised.

He could only imagine the rumors that circulated, the consequences for her from his sudden departure. Davos had alluded to them with his firm words, and Arya with her vicious grey eyes. Brienne deserved to know the truth, and to know that others knew it too. She needed to know that he had spoken in defense of her honor, that he had proclaimed that he had loved her, that he still loved her, and that he hadn't simply abandoned her for another.

So, for one of the first times in his life, Jaime swallowed his pride.

"I did not return to Cersei's service, your Grace. I don't claim that I went to do something heroic, to try to stop her, because at no time did I believe I could do that. She wouldn't listen to me, or to sense or reason or anything else. But I had seen Drogon on the Gold Road, and at Winterfell. I knew what that monster could do. The walls meant nothing to it. I had no doubt it would make it into the city, attack the Red Keep, and Cersei would have to either run, or die. I had vowed to love and protect her always, and I was determined to keep that vow, but I would have done so even without it. I was prepared for either, to help her escape, or comfort her in death. But I did not, would not, help her to remain on that bloody throne. I refused to do that."

"You did not reveal plans, or intelligence, or speak to her of the north?" It was more a statement than a question, but Jaime answered it anyway.

"We didn't have time for conversation. By the time I reached her, the Dragon Queen had gone mad and her dragon feral, and the building was falling on top of us. But, no, I had no intention of doing any of those things. I had fought side by side with the men in the northern army, and I was not about to betray them. I allowed myself to be captured by them, rather than fighting or killing them. And even if you don't believe me on that, believe this: There were people I loved on the other side, and I would never have done anything to endanger them." He paused, realising for the first time that he truly meant that. "I would not have endangered Tyrion, or Brienne, although Tyrion imperiled himself to save Cersei and me."

He looked up, then, at Tyrion, and saw tears in his brother's eyes.

"That was not the first time you sought to save your brother, or Lady Brienne. You defied your father, and your brother, to release Tyrion from the Black Cells. You took Riverrun without loss of life, sacrificing your honour to save Brienne."

At Riverrun? Had he? He had made all kinds of threats, ludicrous threats to Edmure. Would he have carried them out? He still didn't know. All he knew was that he had been so worried about what was happening in the capital, so desperate to get back, that he had been willing to storm that damnable castle and risk killing everyone in it. And then he had seen Brienne, and after that - after she entered it - he had been equally desperate to resolve the siege without bloodshed.

I would not hurt Brienne. I would not fight her. I said whatever I had to, to ensure that would not happen. I didn't think about whether I would actually have to follow through. I assumed - hoped - that Edmure was soft enough, my reputation bad, that I wouldn't have to. And he was.
For Edmure believed me a man capable of using a trebuchet to propel a baby over a wall.

"How do you know all this?" he asked.

"Your deeds, great and good, Ser Jaime, are recorded in the White Book for all the read, although I have no need of reading that book to see them. I have looked back through your life as if it were all laid out in a book. I was in this room with you, over twenty years ago, when you slew Aerys Targaryan. I was with you at Riverrun, when you threatened Edmure’s child, at Winterfell, when you pulled Ser Podrick from beneath the horde, and at Harrenhal, when you jumped into the bearpit to save Ser Brienne of Tarth. You are a complex man, Ser Jaime. You committed acts both fair and foul. But the good, on balance, outweigh the bad, not least of all because you so desperately want them to."

Jaime gaped at the child-king, his mind reeling in disbelief. He felt the room spinning, felt as if the walls were crashing down on him.

"Still, this war was caused, at least in part, by your actions. Your actions were motivated by your desire to protect your children, yes - not by greed or vengeance or lust for power as some others were. Yet in protecting your children you have caused the death of many others, just as innocent and beautiful as yours. That your motivations was not of the vilest type is not a true defence, when your actions have wrought some of the vilest of outcomes."

Jaime nodded. He could not disagree.

"Yet, little is served by vengeance, and actions such as yours cannot be readily deterred through disproportionate punishments. I have no desire to execute you. I would rather use you. You have gifts and opportunities few others do, Ser Jaime, and if you wish to find your place in this world, you must make use of them. You are the heir to Casterly Rock, and to the titles and responsibilities that entails. You are to resume those duties, for me."

Jaime blinked, struggling to comprehend what he had just heard. There were shocked sounds of outrage from others. Exclamations of “no” echoed through the room. Jaime’s was among the loudest.

“No!” He shook his head, violently. "No, no, no. Tyrion is Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, not me."

"Tyrion has held that title while you were presumed dead. You are not dead, you are the eldest son of Tywin Lannister, you are not attainted, you are no longer in the kingsguard, and by right the titles are yours. You cannot refuse them."

Jaime looked around desperately, and then up at Tyrion. His brother’s expression was unreadable. Jaime shook his head.

"I don't want..."

"Whether you want it or not is of no concern to me, Lord Lannister. Another who did not want what was due him caused much grief through his obstinacy. Want it or not, Casterly Rock and the Westerlands are your responsibility. Lord Tyrion cannot return to Casterly Rock. He is the hand of the King, and will likely remain in that role for the remainder of his life. He is an excellent hand, but he is not a warrior, and your men will not follow him. The Westermen must be led lest they run amok. You wish to do good in the world? To make amends for what you perceive to be your mistakes? If so, this is your chance. Your duties await you in the West. You are commanded to resume them."
Jaime stood, speechless. "I..." He stared at King Brandon, who continued to display no emotion at all, and then back to Tyrion, who was also stone-faced. Finally he said, "thank you, your Grace."

"A thank you is not appropriate. This was not a gift. You are excused, Lord Lannister."

At that, Bran’s gaze moved from Jaime to some distant point. Clearly the discussion was over. Jaime swallowed, hard. The ache in his chest felt like he’d forced down daggers.

Pod gave him a long, serious, and somewhat dubious look. Then he took several steps toward his king, took hold of the handles to the wheeled chair and pushed it toward the wide door at the rear of the hall. For an excruciatingly long moment after they left, there was silence. Then the room erupted into discussions, the noise rising about him like a battle cry. Jaime stared around, ready to meet any barbs with swift and deadly parries, but no one actually spoke to him. If anything, these young people appeared to be somewhat in awe. He frantically looked around the room, but he still could not see Brienne. Bronn was gone too. Good move. He glanced up to the only familiar face, and found Tyrion still in place on the balcony. Tyrion motioned his head toward one of the doors. Jaime headed in that direction, well aware of the dozens of sets of eyes watching his back as he did.

The brothers met moments later in the corridor. The hand of the king was wearing an expensive looking outfit of black velvet and leather, the gaudy silver hand badge displayed prominently on his chest. His eyes were bright, his hair negligently shaggy, and his chin covered in a perfectly groomed, stylish stubble.

"You look good" Jaime smiled.

"And you look terrible," Tyrion replied, but he was beaming as well.

Jaime laughed. "I have seen better years. But I'm not dead, so that's something."

Jaime bent down, and let Tyrion wrap his arms around him. The relief at seeing him again, after everything, was overwhelming. If people weren't watching, he might have been tempted to either pick Tyrion up and hug him, or collapse to the ground and pull him into his arms, but he resisted the urge. Tyrion had experienced enough humiliation in his life without that. Jaime stood back up again quickly.

"I don't know how you did it, Jaime," Tyrion said, when he pulled back. "I found you in that rubble. I unburied you. I saw your injuries, I was sure you were dead." His voice hitched, and Jaime saw the tears in his eyes.

"I was very nearly so. But here I am. Thank you for finding me."

Tyrion shook his head, and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "This one is even more unbelievable than the time you charged the dragon."

"Yes, and I got out of this one without owing any favors to Bronn."

"He's rich enough now to be doing favours for you. I can't believe you survived a tower falling on your thick head. You really are a cat aren't you?"

"On my ninth life, I think," Jaime agreed. Although any residual Lion of Lannister is definitely pounded out of me now.

"I'd say be more careful from now on, but doubtless you won't listen, so I won't waste my breath." Tyrion said, as he gestured down a corridor, indicating it was time to walk. "Come, we need to
talk. Someplace less ... conspicuous."

Jaime followed Tyrion out of the throne room, and across the courtyard to the remains of the Tower of the Hand. It was a stumpy looking shadow of what it used to be. He listed his injuries as they walked, back and stomach and legs and shoulder. “My lungs are not too good either,” he said. “Maester said I breathed in too much dust when the building fell.” He sounded like an old man.

"And our dear sister has passed?” Tyrion asked, not unkindly, as they entered the tower through a new looking gate.

Jaime stiffened at the mention of Cersei. "Yes. It wasn't ... an easy passing."

"No, I imagine not. She never did anything the easy way."

Tyrion led him down a corridor, the walls held up with wooden timber buttresses, then up a short staircase, and into what appeared to be a study. There was a broad desk, lots of scrolls and paper, and much in the way of mess. Tyrion wandered to the back of the room, pulled out a bottle of wine and poured two cups.

"Arbor Gold, enjoy."

"Thanks," Jaime took the cup. He hadn't drunk heavily since Winterfell, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to again. Cersei's obvious alcoholism had been a salutary wake-up call about his own increasingly indulgent habits, and in any case he didn't want to block his life out anymore. He sipped his drink, but felt slightly nauseous. Cersei's breath had smelt of this exact wine as the Keep fell down around them.

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, until Jaime drew a breath, and addressed his brother apologetically. "So, apparently, I am to return to the Rock and take up my duties as heir. Father would be delighted."

He watched his brother carefully, but the expression on Tyrion's face was still unreadable. "You were Lord Paramount for months. You should still be the Lord Paramount. I know you want the Rock. I don't want to usurp you, not after all that has happened. I've never been interested in the titles or wealth, or being a lord, you know that. If I could give it back, I would ..."

Tyrion frowned, swallowed the entire cup of wine, and reached to pour himself another.

"You're right, I do want the Rock. I am not happy about this, not least of all because I know you don't want it. But on this point, King Brandon is strangely firm. He spoke to you longer than he has spoken to nearly anyone else, except maybe Bronn, and of course me. I can only assume that he has some bigger plan in mind. In any case, he is right. I am the Hand. Much as with father when he became the Hand, I do not expect to return to Casterly Rock, and it has suffered for too long under an absent lord. The Westerlands are a mess, and you will have much to do there. I wish you luck."

Jaime ground his teeth. "Yes. I think I will need it. Luck, that is, because I cannot be said to have much skill at anything related to managing father's estates."

Tyrion smirked, "Well then, you may yet fuck it up, in which case it will come back to me.

Jaime laughed, but vaguely wondered just how little time it would take him to do just that. He had no idea what to do. He'd rarely paid attention in any of his father's lessons. Even when he was young, and the unassailable heir, he assumed he'd always have Cersei to do the logistics and recording and the inside stuff, while he competed in tourneys and dazzled guests with his wit.
They had even dressed in each other's clothing and swapped lessons to better play on their strengths, with the result that he wasn’t half bad at battle-field stitching, and she was much better at accounts. By the time he had the beginnings of a beard, and her breasts, they'd been heading for Kings Landing and the lessons had stopped. Soon after he joined the kingsguard, and while that had mainly been inspired by a desire to keep fucking Cersei, a deep desire to never undertake another inventory or write a simpering diplomatic scroll had also played its part.

In any case, he didn't want to go to the Rock. Not now anyway. He wanted to find Brienne. Find her, and apologise, and beg her to give him another chance and promise to be a better man. And he couldn’t see how that could happen while he was at the Rock.

"Tyrion, what happened to Brienne? She wasn't at Court, and no one will tell me anything."

Tyrion raised an eyebrow. "Thinking of going back to her this time?"

"It wasn't like that, and you-."

" - know it? Do I? Do you?" He grimaced. “Does she?"


"Yes."

"And, it's ... good? What she wrote?"

"To say it put the best possible illumination on your stupidity is something of an understatement. And what she wrote ... well, I think it is safe to assume she bears you no ill will. You should go read it, if Pod lets you anywhere near the White Tower."

Jaime let out a long breath, and tried to calm the wave of gratitude and hope that washed over him. *No ill will*. But of course, Brienne wouldn't, would she? She was harsh and judgmental of people at times, but she had always been understanding of him. Curiously blind when it came to his flaws, actually, as he'd so brutally tried to remind her in that gods forsaken courtyard in Winterfell.

*Cleary I did not get my message through her stubborn skull*. But he couldn't bring himself to feel sorry about that, even though it had no doubt caused her pain. At that realisation, Jaime felt another stab of guilt, this one low and deep in his chest.

"Or she's the kind of person who puts ill-will aside. Which we know she is."

"Maybe," Tyrion said sadly. "She was hurt, Jaime. But she is also strong."

"I didn't mean to hurt her..." he began, but as soon as he'd said it he knew it wasn't true.

He had known he would hurt her, and he had said those things to her, and left her, anyway, so that had to amount to intent, didn't it? He'd tried to tell himself, on that journey south, that he had wanted her to hate him, and that's why he did what he did. But the truth was he didn't want her to hate him, *he couldn't* want that. He just wanted her to understand, to know what he was and what he had done and why he deserved to share a fate with Cersei. Why he had to help her. But he’d fucked it up spectacularly. He’d indulged in a self pitying little rant, and then left before he, or she, could change his mind.

He'd been fortunate she didn't order him captured and detained. But perhaps she had? That would explain the ease with which he was caught at Kings Landing. *That and the fact I barely tried to*
He knew nothing could change the fact he had hurt her. He should just stay away from her. Leave her be, to find a man worthy of her. A man without his issues, his dark past, a man who didn't just admit to murder, treason and incest before the new king and the royal court.

But he just couldn't let her be, not when there was hope.

And there was hope.

He had to know.

"She ...How is she? Have you seen her?" He asked Tyrion.

"Not for some time, no. I saw her before she left for the Riverlands."

"The Riverlands?"

"She's with the Lannister army, Jaime, or what use to be the Lannister army."

Jaime almost choked on his wine. "What?"

"She and Daven led the Lannister host though the Riverlands, to the Twins. They managed to bring order to the worst areas. The men will shortly be released, to go back to their homes in the Westerlands and try to bring in a harvest. They'll be your men. Brienne will likely accompany them, for some distance, perhaps even back to Lannisport. I'm sure I don't need to tell you this, but they already love her."

Of course they love her, Jaime thought. But then he thought, love her how? Daven was with her. Jaime felt an irrational sense of, what, jealousy? Daven had never been as handsome as Jaime, but Brienne may not care too much about that. He was bigger than Jaime, closer to Brienne's size, and didn't have a history of throwing children out windows or fucking his sister. He was a bit like a cleaner, better spoken version of Tormund, and Brienne never truly shut him down.

You sound very jealous.

I do, don't I?

"Did Daven marry that Frey?" he asked cautiously.

This time it was Tyrion who nearly spat the wine. "Are you jealous? Of our cousin? I suppose he is dashing in his own way, and even taller than you..."

Jaime scowled. Tyrion rolled his eyes.

"Yes, he married his Frey, and they’re miserable. I understand that Daven and Brienne get on well. But your lady is too honourable to pursue a married man."

As opposed to an oathbreaking, kingslayer?


Tyrion snorted. "You're unbelievable. Have you not heard anything I have said over the past half an hour?"

"Nothing that convinces me I shouldn't be jealous of the Lannister who is with her."
Tyrion poured himself another wine, but Jaime put his hand over his cup when he held the bottle out to him. It was a gesture borrowed from Brienne.

“If you want her, you need to go and get her. But this time, you will have to marry her, both for the sake of her reputation, and, given the way her men care for her, for your own safety.”

"Yes. Right. I’ve heard what people have been saying, that we’re betrothed. Happy to oblige, only she likely won't let me within a mile of her."

"I think you're mistaken about that."

"Do you? Have you met Brienne?"

"More recently than you, Jaime." Tyrion said firmly. "You should go and meet her. And fortunately, she seems to be heading your way."

And then it struck him. Yes. She was heading for Casterly Rock.

Casterly Rock, the one place where he might be able to do some good. The place where he could prove himself a fair man, a just lord, one far better than his father. And he’d do it too. No more thuggish Cleganes, mad dog enforcers, extortionate taxes or parading naked whores through the streets. No more fallow fields and stolen livestock, petty disputes, corrupt bureaucrats, absent lords or rampaging foreign armies. He’d do it, even if he had to pay someone to show him how.

He left the next morning, headed for a Casterly Rock, where his duties awaited, and where he would hopefully prove he was a man fit to be married to Brienne of Tarth.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah, this was a little bit of a repeat of the Winterfell trial, but that one was so minimal, I don’t think they overlap excessively (or at least I hope they don’t...). Besides, in the best traditions of medieval show trials, this one was rigged from the outset, with Bran (or Tyrion) ensuring an acquittal. :)


I am not sure what I think of this chapter. It went a little different to how I planned. But it is what it is so I will post and move on.

JAIME

Casterly Rock

Jaime had been all of fourteen when he had last lived at Casterly Rock. Callow, arrogant, entitled and oblivious. Little more than a child, he had already had his own dedicated apartments, a suite of large, ostentatiously decorated rooms with high ceilings and views over his father's lands - his lands, he was constantly reminded. He'd taken it all for granted. The mattress stuffed with feathers and covered in fine silks and the linens from some exotic location. The wine on the mantle, the nuts and fruits and fresh bread on request. The way in which his wants were indulged by an endless parade of servants. The grovelling and toadyng. His constant, casual exercise of absolute power.

He would be sleeping in those same apartments tonight, but they bore little resemblance to what they had all those years ago. Casterly Rock was near derelict. The unsullied who had garrisoned the fortress had little time for luxury or style. They had stripped the rooms of salable valuables, smashed what was left, and then locked the place up to gather dust. His chambers had not escaped the carnage. The mattress, curtains and carpets were all gone, the gold leaf scraped off. His bed was a bent, splintered and overturned frame. A pewter decanter lay on its side on the floor, next to broken cups. Even the wardrobes were empty. Jaime had a hard time imagining Grey Worm's men favouring his gaudy old clothes, so those too must have been sold.

He'd ordered the chamberlain's assistant to have a camp bed placed in his bedroom and water brought up. He felt passingly rueful about putting the boy to such effort, and certainly it would have made more sense to open a few of the lower rooms first. But Jaime found himself longing for something familiar, something like home, and that desire overwhelmed his common sense. Fortunately, it was warm enough to not bother with a fire, so he did not need to add smoke to the dust.

The boy arrived with water, and Jaime washed his face, ran his fingers through his short, ill-kept hair and beard and tried to make himself look presentable. Lannisters had long been known for their golden looks and impeccable taste, and he knew he was not living up to that reputation. The younger servants, many of whom had never met him, had stared at his scruffy appearance with undisguised disdain and consternation. Well, get use to it, he thought. Your golden lion is maimed and old and dull.

Jaime poured himself a cup of wine and wandered over the to the balcony. He stared out over the hills and mountains, the view familiar despite the many years.

Mine, he thought dully. My responsibility.
He had left this land as a youth, off to be a knight and to be with Cersei, two things that had until recently been inseparable in his mind. The people of the Westerlands knew nothing of him, other than that he had readily abandoned them, slew a king and violated his own sister. No doubt many were disgusted by him. His father had told him not to care for the opinions of sheep, and for decades Jaime had tried to take that advice. But it wasn't in him to continue to do so. He wanted to be liked and respected. Longed for it, really.

“You cannot eat love, nor buy a horse with it, nor warm your halls on a cold night,” his father had warned him. Yet in Jaime's experience, good food, fine horses and warm halls meant very little without love.

*And I want to be a lord people can love.*

There, he'd admitted it. And Cersei was not here to mock it. He wanted to be a true lord, to right wrongs and do justice and be loved by his fat, happy peasants. To be known Good Lord Lannister or Goldenhand the Just. He thought he would be good at it. He just wished he knew how to go about achieving it. He had no idea where to even start.

Jaime poured himself another drink, and let his eyes be drawn to the soft glow of the Sunset Sea. His mind drifted across the waves to Arya Stark. *Out there, on a ship, going gods knows where. Stupid, stubborn, mad little wolf that she is.* Arya was another of his family's victims, he supposed, although she had risen above all the misfortune they had heaped on her. She had even saved his life, for reasons he still didn't quite understand. He hoped she was safe, wherever she was over that horizon. *Perhaps I will live long enough to see her return to that underwhelming lord of hers.* He could well imagine her birthing fierce, uncontrollable children who raged across the Stormlands like thunder and drove Gendry to distraction.

*Gendry is Brienne's lord too,* he remembered. His eyes drifted back across the mountains. He wondered where she was, if she was still with Daven and the army. If she was coming back, *here.* He finished his drink and tried to stop thinking.

Jaime left his chambers and wandered down through the living areas, the cabinets, the offices, the dining rooms, the guard rooms, and the storerooms, taking stock of the damage and the decay. There were memories everywhere, some good, some bad. *But mainly good,* he supposes. At least as far as they involved Tyrion and Cersei and the distant echoes of his mother. He had more mixed feelings about his father. It was impossible to think of Tywin without stirring an emotional cauldron of fear, awe, pride, shame. He'd had it the easiest of his siblings, the indulged, favoured heir. But he'd grown to manhood under the weight of the knowledge that he could never be his father. He was not as quick as Cersei or as clever as Tyrion, not patient or wise enough to rule, not capable of justifying the tremendous luck that had seen him borne as the heir to Casterly Rock, and Cersei born a girl.

*That was one reason why I wanted us to stay together,* he remembered. *We complemented each other. Me and Cersei, and Tyrion too. But they didn’t want to live in the shadow of my glory. How could I not have seen that?*

Perhaps he had not seen it because he had not seen himself as separate from them, and certainly not from Cersei. *Family was all that mattered, but in practice 'family' had too often just meant Tywin and me, the others sacrificed for our glory.*

*And yet it was been me who opted out first. Because I knew even then that this should be Tyrion's. Aunt Genna is right, he is father's son, not me.*

Pushing aside the guilt, Jaime continued to reminisce as he explored. He drew his fingers along
the long dining table Tyrion had back-flipped down as a boy, remembering how his brother had elicited rare laughter from even Cersei. He paced the yard where he'd learned to use a wooden sword, training with Addam and Daven and so many others, reveling in being naturally good at something. He toured the stables, tried to recall the names of his many horses. *When did I stop naming them? At what point had one too many died?* He even sat at the desk in the small study where his father had locked him for hours every day until he learned to read. That was a less pleasant memory, but at least he *could* read and write. He knew of knights who relied entirely on maesters. He made his way down the grand staircase, running his left hand along the stone banister. He'd slid down it once, as a boy, trying to impress Cersei, but she'd rolled her eyes and told him he was a fool. He vaguely remembered that back then the walls had been hung with portraits of long dead Lannister scions, men and women whose names Cersei and Tyrion would have known but of which he had no idea. They were all gone too. Sold or burnt... *probably the latter. Who'd buy a portrait of a Lannister?*

He ate a lunch of cornbread and mutton in the Great Hall, joined by Lyle Crakehall ("Strongboar to me friends") and his men, and the handful of courtiers who were resident in Lannisport and the surrounds. The meal was made with the familiar flavours of his youth, stronger and heartier than the food served in Kings Landing. He had released many of the castle servants prior to the unsullied conquest, and he would need to reach out and summon them back, along with his bannerman when he got things under control. The Crakehalls and Marbrands who had taken many in would likely be glad to be rid of the expense, but he would need to find a way to meet it instead.

He sent too for his Aunt Genna. She was widowed now - *Arya's work* - and while not likely to be the least upset about the loss of her husband, she would have mourned the deaths of her Frey sons who had attended that deadly banquet. He hoped she wanted to return home. He needed her help.

Having worked up his courage with a good meal and some introspection, Jaime made his way into the lower levels of Casterly Rock, into first the catacombs and dungeons, and then the mines. It was no longer an easy journey, as his stressed and weary mind warned him again and again that he was underneath hundreds of feet of rock. He imagined the walls and ceiling falling, crushing him, as they had in the Red Keep, only this time he would die alone, in the dark, with only memories to comfort him.

*Fabulous. Now I can add claustrophobia to my list of failings,* he thought in frustration.

The mines were in even worse shape than the rest of the fortress - stripped, hacked at, and possibly now dangerous. He frowned as he looked at the dented, gouged walls, the abandoned, half-baked scaffolding. Tywin would have been disgusted. He decided to give the mining tunnels a miss, lest he really tempt fate too far and end up buried twice. He would need to find masons and engineers to see what could be salvaged. He would need to open new mines, too, elsewhere, as it was clear they could no longer rely just on the Rock to supply gold and wealth.

Jaime turned to leave, but heard something, something that sounded like a foot crunching dry rock. He held still and listened. At first all he could hear was the distant dripping of water, but after a moment he heard another, soft, crunch. Footsteps, coming from the passageway he'd just come down from. Logic told him it was probably just one of his men, looking for him, but he could feel the hairs on his neck rise in warning, and he had long learned not to ignore his gut. There was no hiding in this room, and certainly not while holding a torch - and he wasn't about to put that out - but standing in the open served no purpose either. He slunk against the wall, gently placed the torch on the ground, and as quietly as he could, drew his sword. The sliding noise echoed in the chamber.

There *was* someone coming. He concentrated on the sound of the footsteps. They, too, paused just
outside the room, as if the figure were listening. Whoever it was would know somebody was here, they could see the torchlight, and yet they hesitated, and did not cry out. Jaime's chest went cold. This felt wrong.

The figure advanced through the door, and Jaime raised his blade.

"Halt."

The figure turned, and revealed itself to be a vision of horror. Even in the dim light, Jaime could see the exposed bone at the jaw, loose pieces of skin, and empty eye socket.

* A wight, he thought, an edge of panic in his mind. What the fuck was a wight doing here? *

The thing opened its mouth as if trying to talk, and for a moment Jaime was frozen in shock. It hissed a word, and Jaime felt a sudden, cold fear that it had spoken to him. *It knows me.* Then he regained his wits, and slashed at it.

Almost faster than Jaime could see, the figure raised its arm, and battered the blade away with its vambrace. If he'd had Widow’s Wail, the creature would have lost its arm, but this sword was not near as sharp. Still, Jaime felt it sink through skin and the wight grunted.

*Wights didn't grunt.*

He took a step back as the creature went on the offensive and lunged at him. He barely ducked back as it blade slashed across his face. He could feel the skin on his cheek split, but was grateful it wasn’t his eye. This wasn't a mindless foe. It was a talented swordsman, although its movements were stiff and awkward. Jaime blocked clumsily at first, off balance and surprised, but he regained his equilibrium and came around for another swing. The creature blocked. They dueled, Jaime concentrating on staying out of its way, wearing it down. Thrust, parry, step, thrust. He kept his breathing even. Its thrusts got slower, and it appeared to be beginning to weaken. *Was it panting?* He tried to listen and look, but nearly lost his other hand when a thrust got to close. Finally, Jaime saw an opening, a too wide parry. *It's tiring,* he realised, relieved. With a roar, he slashed his blade deeply into the creature's neck. It fell to the ground, and Jaime gave it another blow to the neck to be sure. Blood flowed and pooled on the stone.

It was dead.

*Or should that be 'dead again'?*

For a long moment, he stood staring at it, panting.

*What the fuck was that?*

He caught his breath, and then went to get assistance from one of the few men he knew he could trust.

"Bloody hell. What did you do to him?" Strongbow asked incredulously when he saw the ruined corpse, and then the even more ruined head that lay a foot or two from it.

"Removed his head," Jaime answered blandly.

"And the rest."

"Head aside, I found him like that."
Strongboar laughed. "Then why did you have to remove his head? Bugger looks like he suffered enough."

"Because he was attacking me," Jaime drawled. Never had he thought he would miss the north, but at least there the dead men walking and dead dragons flying were a part of life and no one would think he was crazy.

"You saying this is one of those dead things?" Strongboar asked, after a moment.

"Yes." Jaime said firmly. Then, "I don't know..."

He frowned. It looked like one of the wights, albeit slightly better preserved than most. But it had fought viciously and with no small amount of skill. The dead, in his experience, were largely mindless and worked on instinct. This one bled, although he supposed that wasn't definitive. The wights were drained of blood, but maybe this one had some left? A lot left. Who the fuck knew. He'd fought the things for an entire night, but it had been so dark and chaotic that he never gotten a good look at one. I mainly kept my eyes on Brienne, he remembered. And Pod, because he was a good lad, and because he was important to her. He had done what he could to keep them both alive, while trying not to lose his shit as the fucking dragon - the same one that had killed his men on the Gold Road - blasted things around him.

He hadn't had time to take notes on undead behaviour.

Jaime shook his head. The only logical explanation was that this thing was a wight.

"It must be a wight. A present from the Dragon Queen's people, I suspect," he said, finally, cautiously. "They must have stuffed it someplace as a surprise for when we came back. I might have let it out. There may be more. Get some men and go over this place with a fine-toothed comb before we let anyone else back in."

"Right," Strongboar nodded. He didn't look quite as keen on this task as he usually did about plans that potentially involved beating things up.

Jaime watched him go, and then squatted down and looked at the corpse. It was long past being identifiable. Pale, milky skin, withered and stretched, a damaged eye socket, half missing tongue and lips, and a few strand of limp hair. It was wearing northern armour. Stark armour. A glimmer of recognition fluttered through his mind, but he pushed it away. He frowned, and stood up.

Just a wight.

An unusually warm, competent one, that forgot it didn't need to breath.

He ordered the remains be burned.

It was only after several hours of restless, frustrated sleep that Jaime remembered that all the wights had been destroyed when the Night King fell.

And this one, he was sure, had called him kingslayer.

BRIENNE

North of Casterly Rock
As the plains and creeks of the Riverlands gave way to the hills and mountains of the Westerlands, Brienne found herself growing increasingly nervous. Casterly Rock was but days away.

*And Jaime was alive.*

They had stopped in Riverrun, to pick up the River Road to Casterly Rock, and a raven had been waiting for her, this time from Tyrion.

"*Our lion returns to us. He is short a few lives but otherwise not too worse for wear. There is to be a trial. I'll take care of it. Do not worry. T."*

Of course she had worried, but there was little she could do about it. Whatever had happened, it had likely happened well before she even got the message. A message which, she noted with a no small amount of relief, did not mention Cersei.

Over the long days of riding that followed she had started to imagine their reunion. At first it had been at Kings Landing, but gradually hope got the better of her, and she was picturing Casterly Rock. She imagined Jaime waiting on the ramparts, smiling down at her as she approached at the head of his host. A fairy tale in reverse, the lady in the armour and her lord in his castle. *And no more likely to come true than any other tale.* But no matter how many times she told herself that she had no reason to believe Jaime would be at Casterly Rock, waiting for her, she couldn't smother than little bit of girlish hope that he would be. Worse, she found herself distracted, and unable to concentrate or sit still for thinking about the possibilities.

She tried to distract herself with duty, but there were only so many training exercises she could order, and no one was very enthusiastic about any of them. The men were on the last stretch of the campaign, mere days from Lannisport, and their discharge, their pay, their right to return home. The River Road was safe as any, even for individual travellers, and the Lannister army was too large and well equipped for bandits to tangle with. Only dragons could threatened it, and there were no more of them. Duty provided little relief.

Instead, she tried admiring the scenery. She had never been to the Lannister lands before. They had always sounded so distant and exotic. "*A land of gold, from the people to the houses to the color of the dirt*," is now her father had described it. Now she was here, she agreed that it did have a sort of yellow tinge - fields of beige-coloured wheat and cereal crops, orangey-tan cliff faces, the gilded shimmer of the setting sun over the waters of Sunset Sea. It was starkly beautiful, although in a different way to green and blue Tarth. There was an air of wildness and danger to these lands. Something unpredictable and fierce. *Much like its lords,* she supposed.

They passed many abandoned villages, but few were in the devastated condition those further north.

"*Villages and towns spring up around mines, and dry up when the gold does,*” Daven explained to her. "*Lordless smallfolk sometimes move into the ruins, start up farms, but just as often they end up drifting away once they have run out of what is readily available to pillage.*"

But Brienne found it hard to believe any land could stay so abandoned for so long, without petty lords playing their part. "*Did the Westerlands not suffer during the war? Surely they did not escape unscathed?*"

Daven frowned. "*Of course not. But we didn't see much direct conflict, other than a little from the Ironborn on the coast. It is not armies that ravage the mountainfolk, but missing men, mercenaries and deserters. Who wants to mine iron when you can swing steel? And once you get your steel, why work for someone else's wealth and glory when you can seize it for yourself? We've got*
bandits and felons, same as the Riverlands, only they tend to be our own folks, preying on each other. I'm looking forward to putting things right."

"You'll have quite the challenge when all your troops are discharged."

"Not all of them will be. There are plenty of men without lands and families who'll stay."

She nodded, listening and discussing plans, but her thoughts drifted elsewhere. *It won't be my problem soon,* she told herself. *I'll be back in Kings Landing, with Bran, standing guard over council meetings and progresses.*

Yet she couldn't shake the flicker of hope that maybe, one day, it would be her problem. *If I marry Jaime. If I become Lady of Casterly Rock.*

Even now, she was sure that Daven was assuming that she'd be staying with them, particularly now he knew Jaime was alive. Why lecture her at such length if he did not believe such? She had overheard other things, too. Hushed jokes about beddings and feasts. She suspected that many of her men thought they were part of a wedding parade, escorting their lady to her groom. She didn’t know what to make of it, whether to be excited or offended or just worried. She had never been the subject of this kind of speculation before. She hoped she could bear the pain and humiliation if it was all a mistake.

And then there were the other, practical problems. *I'm Lord Commander. I cannot be married. I certainly cannot live at Casterly Rock.* Whatever the romance of her impending reunion, that was the reality of the life she had made for herself. It was a life of which she was proud, but one not readily compatible with family. At times she felt trapped by the weight of expectations, and in such moments she cursed the rumor of their engagement, her part in spreading it, the fact it was needed at all. *Every other knight has his lover, why not me?* She knew the answer. *Because I am a woman. Knighted, yes, yet always defined by what happens between my legs.*

In some ways, she was as guilty as the others. She constantly thought of what had happened between her legs, when Jaime there, inside them. Even a glimmer of memory was enough to send a rush of heat to her groin, such that all Garret's ramblings about rations and discharge papers, and Daven’s talk of deployments, were lost beneath a distracting wave of longing. A longing not just for the sex, but for the touching, the closeness, the easy companionship, the friendship. The prospect of other things too, things she barely allowed herself to think about, a child in her belly, at her breast, a home, certainty. *But also a longing for the sex.* She couldn’t deny that. Having considered the question she spent an uncomfortable rest of that day wishing it was the leather of Jaime's coat, rather than a saddle, beneath her.

By two days out from Lannisport, Brienne’s stomach was roiling and her appetite gone. It was as if she were going into battle. *And in one sense I am,* she thought. *A woman’s battle. Conquests and alliances, but built through marriage and children rather than blades and bows. Reputations borne of abstinence rather than achievement. Dreams not of glory, but of love and romance and security.*

She was glad no one could be bothered with the daily briefing. Her men seemed as distracted as her. Only Daven was dour, a contrast to his usual amiable self.

"One day closer to my wife," he said sadly. "I feel I'm being punished for my success. I might have to give losing some consideration next time."
One day out from Casterly Rock, and the host made camp in a valley between rugged hills, along
the banks of a crystal clear river. Brienne's mind was a catastrophe of anticipation, fear and
desperate longing, and even an afternoon of putting the younger boys through their paces was not
enough to distract her from it. If anything, it made it worse. She missed Pod. *These are his lands
too*, she recalled. The Paynes had their holdings only a short distance from here. *Jaime could
grant him lands as well as I could. We could bring him here.* But Pod was kingsguard too, and not
like to leave it.

Evening found Brienne sitting in her tent, alone, toying distractedly with her dinner as her stomach
clenched and un-clenched and her heart ached. The meal was simple fare, a watery soup, but there
was plenty of it as the cook used the last of their supplies. She gave up on it, pushed the bowl
aside. She collected Oathkeeper from its resting place and sat down to polish it, running her hands
lovingly over the intricate pommel, with its ruby eyes and teeth.

*How did I come to love a lion?*

The blade was bright and she could see her eyes reflected in the pale metal of the blade. Blue
eyes, clear and wide. Her best feature. Jaime had used so many words to describe them -
"astonishing", "enchanting", "bewitching", even "beautiful". *The only part of me that is*. He
would compliment her eyes as they walked together, rode together, even as they made love. "*Look
at me, my lady, open those beautiful eyes...*” And she would, letting him lose himself in her eyes,
as she lost herself in the feel of him around her and inside her.

Well, those eyes had lines around them now, deeper than they had been only a few months ago.
Another scar too, above the left. More freckles. They were still blue though. For a passing
moment she wished that Sansa were here. She had offered to apply black kohl to her eyes once,
before the banquet, *before Jaime*, but Brienne had declined. She hadn't wanted to attract attention,
hadn't wanted anyone to think she thought face paint would make a difference to her plain features,
hadn’t wanted to embarrass Jaime by thinking he might find her attractive.

*But he had. He came to me. And now I know he likes my eyes ... well...*

But she had no kohl, no idea how to apply it, and no intention of doing so around her men anyway.

*And Jaime wouldn’t care.*

She tilted the blade. *A sword for a mirror.* It was a metaphor for her life. She had a tortured
relationship with her reflection - if she avoided it, it could not mock her - but she made herself look
now. *Still plain*, but age was something of a leveler, and she no longer compared herself to
maidens. She had allowed her hair to grow a little longer than usual, and a slightly curling lock of
it fell across her forehead, near her nose. In the metallic gleam of the sword, it looked greasy and
lank. There was a smear of dirt across her forehead too. She probably smelled rank. She needed a
bath. *Just in case.*

The river called to her, and as darkness fell, Brienne found herself wandering down to the waters
edge, blanket and soap in hand. The men had been bathing in the shallows earlier, many in
preparation for meeting their wives again, their children, perhaps even babes in arms they had
never seen before. As she followed the river’s course, feet sinking in the muddy banks, she
wondered what that would be like, to return to a family who missed her, who needed her. *I have
my father*, she thought. *He misses me.* But it didn't quite seem to be the same thing. She
wondered, if she had a family, she would ever be able to undertake this work.

*I can’t imagine I would ever want to leave them.*
A few hundred yards along she found a relatively secluded spot, albeit one where she could still hear the sounds of the camp. She stripped off her breeches, but left her shift on, checking that it was long enough to cover the tops of her thighs. Even among these men, all of whom she had fought beside, she had to be careful to ensure decorum, to not create a scene or controversy by reason of her body being what it was. She trusted them, always, but experience had taught her that, even unburdened by gold or goods, a woman had something that a man could take and it paid to be cautious.

How many men had sought to take her? The men in Renly's camp with their games and tricks, the bandits by the inn, Locke's men. Man after man who'd mocked her and called her ugly, or beast, or freak, but who had sought to claim her nonetheless. Good enough to steal, but not worth the effort of earning. Until Jaime. And Tormund, she thought with a sardonic smile. She hoped the wildling had found another woman to be the mother of his giant, redhaired babies.

She waded into the river, felt the cool water envelope her. Her fingers and toes numbed immediately, but the bubbling emotions in her stomach and heart did not. Once she was wet, she began to wash herself with a piece of lye soap she'd carefully saved for this kind of occasion. Arms, chest, legs. Finally, soap gone, she reached between her legs. She brought herself off quickly, eyes constantly watching the riverbank, nervous about being disturbed, but desperate for release. Something else that was harder for women.

When she was done, she made her way back to the shore, wrapped herself in a blanket and headed back to her tent.

The mood in the camp was festive, as befitted their penultimate night together, safe and alive and nearly home. All around her, she can hear the sound of men enjoying themselves. Cheering, drinking, a few even fucking - camp followers mainly, but some possibly each other. She hoped they could find happiness, even if only briefly. Enjoy it, she thought, before everything changes, again.

JAIME

Casterly Rock

Jaime stood on the ramparts of Casterly Rock and watched the Lannister army approach from the mountains to the north. Brienne rode at the head of it, a white-clad figure with a flowing cloak. It was too great a distance to make out her features, and a helm obscured her face in any case, but it was undoubtedly her. Jaime would know that set of shoulders anywhere.

Next to her was Daven, his ridiculous hair and beard flowing in the wind. They appeared to be talking, turning to face each other regularly. At one point his coz threw back his leonine head in what could only have been a laugh. They clearly got on.

Are you jealous of our cousin? Tyrion had asked.

Jaime had laughed, but the truth hurt. Yes. Yes I am. It wasn't the the sudden, irrational, raging kind of jealousy he'd felt about Tormund, more a deep, lonely longing, a feeling of absence and loss. Brienne and Daven were laughing together, riding together, sharing command. Had she even been like that with him?

Yes, at Winterfell, before you fucked her over, came the unbidden response.
The host could not enter the fortress. They drew to a halt on the plains below, and he watched as they began to make camp - red and gold tents being erected in organised lines. They were to have a feast, as best as was possible given limited supplies, and then pay and supplies would be distributed, and the men would be discharged, free to return to their fields and their wives, to try to plant a season's worth of crops and babies.

He knew he should go down and relieve Brienne of command, but nerves left him paralyzed. Instead, he just gazed down at her, hoping against hope that she would look up and see him. She did not.

He watched until the sun began to set, until he saw a small delegation begin to make their way to the castle. The minutes of their journey, the wait, stretched like hours. He stood nervously, trying several different poses against the window, the desk, sitting, standing. He felt a fool. A withered, tremulous cripple. Eventually, he settled on standing, arms and hand behind his back, about as formal a posture as he could manage.

He swallowed hard as his man came to announce the Lord Commander's arrival, and to admit her to his presence.

"Ser Brienne of Tarth, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard."

Hearing her name, her title, knowing she was feet away, if that, made his head spin. He shuffled, stood up straighter, fixed his eyes on the doorway.

And there she was. His lady. Her strong, broad figure filled the doorway as she entered the room. She no longer wore the blue armour that he had made for her. _That hurts_. But the new armour, _kingsguard armour_, suited her well, and made her look, if anything, even more imposing. She still had Oathkeeper at her side, he noticed with relief and pleasure. She gripped it, knuckles slightly white. He raked his eyes up from her armour to her face. She looked pensive, as he imagined he did too. Her lips were pressed into a tight line, but there was a telltale flicker of movement that suggested she was grinding her teeth.

_She's nervous too. Nerves are good. Much better than explosive rage, anyway._

She stopped a dozen paces away, just inside the receiving room entrance, and well out of arms reach. As the Lord Commander, she did not need to bow, they were technically of equal rank. Instead, she inclined her head, and he did likewise.

"My lord Lannister."

He swallowed again, trying to suppress the lump in his throat that was liable to make his voice squeak. "Lord Commander."

The air was thick with tension. The three men standing behind her were watching them with open, perhaps slightly amused, interest. Brienne’s voice was as formal and proper as expected, but beneath his scrutiny she had gone slightly red. She was fortunate her men could not see that. He wondered if she had expected awkwardness and if she had kept the delegation small in anticipation of that. _Thank fuck she didn't bring Daven._

This was probably far from the triumphant homecoming she had expected, and certainly far from that which she deserved. Any other commander returning with such success would expect a triumph, but here was Brienne, slipping into the castle with barely an escort. He had the sinking feeling that, once again, he had stolen something from her.
The silence stretched between them until he could remember what he had intended to say. He couldn't, so he settled on something simple instead.

"I would be pleased if you would join me in the cabinet room, Lord Commander. We have much to discuss."

He tried to keep his voice steady. He wasn’t sure that he succeeded, but if Brienne noticed anything amiss she said nothing about it. She looked at him hesitantly. He raised his eyes toward her men, then back to her, meeting her gaze. Ask them to go, he suggested, silently, hoping she understood. They used to be good at silent communication, as much at dinner and in battle. "Behind you!" "There's more of them!" "Do you need a distraction?" "Could you please cut up my food".

He watched indecision flicker across Brienne's face, but then she turned and dismissed her men. "Leave us."

The men looked wary, or maybe disappointed, but they did as she said and left. Jaime stood in silence, watching Brienne, unable to take his eyes from her, as the sound of their footballs retreated down the hallway.

And then they were alone.

The urge to grab her, hold her, kiss her, bury his head in the crook of her shoulder, in her hair or - gods take him - between her legs was nearly overwhelming. He actually shook with the effort of doing nothing.

You have no right to touch her, he told himself. But, oh, he wanted to.

For her part Brienne stood passively, unmoving, looking anywhere but at him.

He was breathing hard as he gathered his wits and courage. He needed a drink, but for them the offer of alcohol was laden with meaning, and it was unlikely to go over very well. Finally, he silence became too much, and he had to say something.

"Brienne..." he began.

She took a deep breath, looked back toward him, and possibly for the first time, seemed to actually look at him. She started, drew a hitching breath. "Your face..."

He raised his hand to his cheek. Oh, yes. The wight thing. He needed to tell her about that, but not now. He shrugged. “I got in a fight."

"Here?" She sounded incredulous, and disappointed too. He felt a moment’s irritation. Of course, think the worst of me Brienne. Think of me as the kind of lord who gets in a brawl in his own castle.

But he swallowed his pride. “It's a long story, and on my list of things to tell you." My very long list, if you care to stay and listen.

She advanced a few steps, raised her hand, and for a wonderful moment, Jaime thought she might touch him. But then she lowered it again, her fingers forming a fist, and shrunk back into herself. She was very pale, he noticed, her skin only a shade or two darker than the white armour. Still, she looked good. Glorious actually.

That was a good place to start.
"You look well," he said, glad of something to say. *You look beautiful* would have been better, but she wouldn't believe him, and he didn't want a fight. Not now. "The kingsguard surely suits you."

She nodded her head. "It is a great honour."

He couldn’t stop a grimace. "For some. Depends on the king."

She looked downed, flushed. "Of course, Jaime, I didn't mean - "

_She called me Jaime. Just Jaime._ A good sign.

He raised his hand. "No, it's alright. I know what you mean. I am glad that you are pleased to serve King Brandon. I'm ..." he stuttered. _What am I?_ "I'm pleased for you."

"Thank you..." she said, barely a whisper.

She was looking at the floor again, and he was shuffling, like some fourteen year old squire meeting his knight’s maiden daughter. His absent fingers clenched. This was excruciating. Fuck it, he needed alcohol.

"Can I get you a drink?" he asked, gesturing toward a small table with a decanter and cups.

She bit her lip, considering, then nodded. "Just a small one."

He wandered over the the decanter and glasses, and poured two small cups, then walked back and handed one to her. Their fingers barely touched, but it sent a tremor of desire through him.

"That was a rather underwhelming escort," he said, conversationally, nodding to a chair and waiting for her to sit. "Where is my dear cousin Daven. Afraid his wife may be here?"

Brienne cautiously sat, and took a sip of the wine. "No one wanted to accompany me. Everyone assumes this is a reunion of a different kind. Daven wasn’t even subtle about what he expected to happen."

("Tell my coz I’ll see him in the tourney yard tomorrow - make sure you leave him walking with a limp!")

Jaime raised his eyebrows. "I know not of what you speak."

She rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "You surely do."

He was teasing her, and she knew it. Dangerous, but better than stilted silence.

She flushed. "Lord Jaime, everyone believes we are betrothed." And now she really was a delightful shade of red. "And...um...well..."

"I see..." he smiled, putting her out of her misery. "Everyone thinks you're coming to see me to -"

"I never confirmed or denied it," Brienne said quickly, cutting him off before he could finish. "I ... well I thought you were dead, and my reputation was so damaged. I took advantage of it. The rumour, I mean. But I won't hold you to it."

“You ‘won’t hold me to it’?”, he repeated slowly, as if she were talking about a promise to purchase bread. As if it were some unwanted obligation. “Brienne, I was faithful to one woman for my entire life, and now I have been, I _am_ faithful to you. How could you possibly think I
"would ever want to not be held to it?"

He leaned forward, closing some of the gap between their chairs. He cautiously reached out to take one of her hands where it rested on her knee. The skin on the back of her hand was surprisingly soft, but her palms were calloused and rough. He half expected her to pull away, but she didn't. Instead, she closed her fingers gently around his, and looked at their clasped hands.

"Brienne, look at me," She did, reluctantly. Her eyes were huge, and both defiant and hopeful. "I want to be bound by that promise." He shook his head, swallowed. "I mean, I want to marry. You."

She blinked, stunned. "You do?"

"But, I don't think you should marry me."

BRIENNE

Casterly Rock

When he took her right hand in his left, the feel of him, his cool, dry skin, was almost like coming home.

When he asked her to look at him, she saw an earnestness and desperation in his eyes that made her chest burn, and her heart beat so loudly in her ears that she was sure that he could hear it. That the whole fortress could hear it.

When he told her he wanted to marry her, it was as if the weight of the world was suddenly lifted from her shoulders, and she was floating, dreaming and delirious, even as she knew it was foolish, reckless, to want so badly a man whose last words to her had been that he was leaving.

And then when he told her that he didn't think she should marry him, she knew that he was looking for an excuse, just like last time, and everything came crashing down in a wave of chaos and pain, until she felt that it who was being crushed beneath a tower.

“I don’t think you should marry me.”

She blinked, tried to force down the agonized disappointment. She began to prepare herself for another speech about why it was his fault that he didn't want her.

No, she thought, I’m not enduring that again. She prepared herself to leave.

Jaime must have felt the tension in her body, felt her muscles bunching, because he gripped her hand, reaching out with his stump as well to stop her leaving. The touch of his fingers burned.

"No, wait, Brienne, listen to me," he said, seriously, grasping her hand. She stared down at their joined fingers. "Please."

She hesitated, then nodded. But she didn't relax. She couldn’t. Her eyes stung, tears taunting her from the corners. I will leave before I let him see me cry again, she swore.

She met his gaze again, and this time he looked sad, forlorn even, but also determined. And beautiful. Even now, older and battered and tarnished, he was still beautiful.
"I endured a trial at Kings Landing," he began, slowly, watching her face. "A real inquisition, not like the one at Winterfell. With King Brandon, who apparently knows everything I have ever done. It all came out, Brienne, every part of it, and in front of his court. My illegitimate children. Cersei. Everything. The court, the people are disgusted with me, and rightly so. I am tainted. If you want out, and to be free from me, as you should, then this is your excuse to go."

She stared at him for a moment, almost uncomprehendingly, while that information sunk in. Everybody knows. But most knew already. If it was an excuse, it was a poor one.

She narrowed her eyes, incredulous. “Do you think leaving you now will magically restore my honour?”

He shrugged despondently. “Yes. No. I don’t know, Brienne, but it is unlikely to hurt it more. The alternative is that everyone knows you chose me. Kingslaying sister fucker that I am. And what would that say about you?”

She blinked, leaned her head against the high back of the chair and closed her eyes to think. She had known of the trial, but not the details. Now everyone knew. She could leave him, return to Kings Landing, put the whole experience behind her and her reputation could be rebuilt. She would be lying if a part of her wasn't tempted.

But she shook her head. "No."

"Brienne, staying with me will hurt you..."

“No,” she said again. She looked back up at him, searched for his eyes, his beautiful ocean eyes. "Leaving you will hurt me more than any stranger’s opinion could.”

She saw love in his eyes then, perhaps even adoration, but pain too. And shame. He looked down, struggled to gain control. She could see the crown of his head, his dull brown hair peppered with silver now, not gold. He was a maimed, old lion, humbled before her.

“I know.” He said, despondently. “I know I hurt you when I left you too. I can’t even believe you’re here after, well, that. If I could, I would take it back. I would - ”

"No, you would do nothing differently." She cut him off. She was in no mood for platitudes and had no stomach for self-deception on either of their parts. She was no longer afraid of Cersei.

But Jaime jerked his head up, stunned, questioning. “What?”

“You think I am angry at you?” She asked.

He looked down, nodded. “Yes. And if you’re not, you should be.”

"I am, a little. Or I was. But I'm not angry at you for going back to be with Cersei, Jaime. I've come to terms with what you did and why you did it. You were with her your entire life, well before me. You couldn't leave her to die alone. You couldn't abandon your child. Not if there was any chance at all. I understand that. But I was angry and hurt at the way you left, and at some of the things you said.” She paused. “Maybe I still am.”

He was still staring at his feet, but she could hear him gulp down a breath. He looked back up at her, face determined. "What I said to you that night was unworthy. I tried to leave without waking you, I watched you for a long time. Which I grant was equally craven, but I thought you were asleep. I ... you found me, and I panicked. But, Brienne, believe me when I say I never meant anything I said to hurt you. I wasn't thinking, except that I knew I had to make sure you didn't
follow me. I had to know you were safe."

"At that, at least, you succeeded," she said. "I knew there was no point in following you. You hurt me enough for me to realise that."

"I did more than hurt you," Jaime said softly, his voice filled with self-loathing not dissimilar to that night. "I dishonoured you and embarrassed you. And now I've trapped you into marriage."

She shook her head, "No, Jaime..."

"I went back expecting to die, Brienne. I thought death would free all of us. You, me, Cersei, even the baby. And it turns out that, had I died, it would have done that. Cersei and I would be gone, and you would be Lord Commander, loved and respected. But now I'm alive, and fate pushes us back together, and everything is fucked up."

She shook her head. No, she wanted to say, no it's not fucked up. Not now. Not anymore.

But before she could say anything, he continued.

"I don't deserve you Brienne. I shouldn't let this happen again. I should make you leave, make you hate me, make sure that you will never want to see me again." He took a deep, ragged breath. His left hand was clenched around hers, knuckles white. "But I can't, Gods help me, I can't send you away. I can't do it again."

Brienne could feel tears in her eyes, but now crying in front of Jaime did not seem quite so bad. She reached down to put her other hand over his, where it held hers in her lap.

"I can't do this again, either, Jaime. I thought you were dead. I grieved for you. I am shocked but glad that you're alive, more glad than I think I have ever been about almost anything. Any bitterness I may have felt is gone, now you're here. But if you ever, ever do anything so fucking stupid again, I will kill you myself. Slowly. Do you understand?"

She meant it too, she realised. Hard love. That's what her father called it.

Jaime stared at her blankly for a second, and then he threw his head back and laughed. "You're too good to be true, Brienne."

"And you're a fool, but I love you anyway."

He grinned. "I know."

They sat for a moment, eyes meeting, three hands touching. And then Brienne couldn't hold back a sob, or her need to fall into him. She moved out of her chair, closed the distance between them, and leaning over, wrapped her arms around Jaime's chest and buried her head in his neck. A moment later, he wrapped his around her back and waist. She held him so tight, she felt his breath hitch, and he gasped a little, but he held her just as firmly.

"Brienne..." he whispered into her ear. "My love."

She tilted her head up to him, and for once he lowered his mouth to hers. His lips were dry, too, chapped, but soft. He sucked gently on her lower lip, then deepened the kiss, running his tongue along her lip, seeking access. She opened her mouth with a groan, felt her hands gripping the front of his shirt. He tasted of wine. Familiar and intoxicating.

Finally, he broke the kiss, and she felt him ease her back from him with his good hand. He reached
out, stroked her cheek. "I know I’m not an easy man to love -"

But she shook her head, cutting him off. "That's not true. Not for me. I've loved you for years, and it's been too easy. I would have liked not to, especially in the early weeks.” She smiled, and he chuckled softly. “I tried not to. When we were on the Kings Road, coming back from Harenhal, I would lie awake and remind myself of why I hated you. But I knew by the time we reached Kings Landing that I’d failed.”

"Really?” he snorted. "I’m surprised. I would have thought the journey would have had the opposite effect - a dose of reality after my daring and dramatic bear rescue. I don’t remember being much company."

"I doubt you remember much at all. You must have been in pain, and yet you nattered on. I listened. We were friends by the time we reached the city. And I didn't have many friends then."

He smiled at her, weakly. "Nor did I. Just you, really. And Tyrion. And then you left."

"You sent me away."

"I had to. It wasn't safe for you, or Pod, and Sansa was in danger too. And then there was that bloody oath. You saw me make it, and you’d never let me forget it, so I had to keep it. That’s what you do to me. You and your honour."

He turned his head away from her then, his gaze resting on the wall. He seemed to consider, then come to a conclusion.

“...It wasn’t my only plan, to send you away. Did I ever tell you that? I had made a deal with my father, to save Tyrion. If Tyrion was granted mercy, I would leave the kingsguard, get married, have heirs."

She stared at him, disbelieving. "You? You never told me..."

“All Tyrion had to do at trial was behave himself, and his life would be spared. But he couldn’t do it. It all fell apart. But if it hadn’t fallen apart…” he turned back to look at her, a broad smile across his face. “I was going to ask you. To marry me. As my friend and protector.”

She laughed at that, not quite believing him. “I would have said no. I would have thought you were mocking me.”

"It wouldn’t have mattered. I would have convinced you. With a lot of cajoling. Or my father would have just blackmailed your father, in the best tradition of high borne marriage pacts."

She pondered that. If not for Tyrion being Tyrion, we may have been married by now. I may have been living at Casterly Rock, maybe with children. It was not an unpleasant thought. But what would have happened then? To Pod? To Sansa? At the Long Night? Now that was an unpleasant thought.

"I won't pretend I was happy about it, leaving the kingsguard, another oath broken. But I thought, with you, it would at least be tolerable. Lucky that didn’t happen though,” Jaime continued, interrupting her thoughts. “Cersei would no doubt have tried to kill you. You may actually have killed her. Or maybe you just would have killed me, given what a cunt I was then. Tyrion would be on the wall. Of course, father would be still be alive, unless you killed him too...”

“So many paths untraveled,” she whispered.
“And so many others I wish I had taken. Sometimes I felt that there were two of me, the part that belonged to Cersei, and the part that wanted to be somewhere else. It just got more confusing with time, until I finally saw you at the Dragon Pit, and ... well, you know what happened.”

She nodded. “And here we are. Apparently soon to be married.”

“By public proclamation. Which makes this the second time I have been thwarted in actually asking you to marry me.”

She giggled, not something she usually made a habit of. “You should still ask my father. Given my despoiled state, he is probably not in a position to say no.”

“I shall ask his forgiveness, and then his permission. Easier that way,” he agreed.

She smiled at him, and he kissed her again, briefly, but then she had to sit back up, as her legs were going numb. She glanced out the window. The sky had darkened, and it was getting late.

“I should get back...” she said regretfully.

Jaime simply sat and stared at her for a long moment, and then finally, he asked, with the kind of cocky grin she hadn’t seen in too long, "you said you loved me for years?"

“Yes.”

"There has never been anyone else then? Not since you met me? I mean, I know you were a maiden, but -"

"No," she admitted. *Never.* She decided to be honest. "I suppose I liked that you were unobtainable. I longed for you, but I never really thought we would be together. As long as I had that dream of you, I didn't need or want to think about anyone else." *I did not need to risk heartbreak or disappointment,* she admitted to herself, although not to Jaime. Handsome and wealthy and charming, he would never understand.

“Not even Tormund?”

She groaned. "He is a kind man, but I had no interest in him. I have already told you, I only wanted you. Even after you left me, I only thought of you." *That sounds pathetic, even to me.*

“The both of us are fucked up,” Jaime said gently, as if hearing her thoughts.

She disagreed. "Given what we've been through, we're both alright." *We're yet to burn a city. One of us has even saved one.*

"I still think you deserve better than a crippled oathbreaker with shit for honour, but if you’re too blind and stubborn to realise it, who am I to complain?"

"Get off it,” she smiled. “You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

"I'm really hoping that we will. Get off, that it. You and I.”

She groaned, but also felt the shiver of desire run through her. Oh yes. Soon. She kissed him gently, a promise of things to come. “Not tonight, I think. I need to get back to my men, lest any more rumours start. Or be confirmed.”

He looked disappointed, but reluctantly got to his feet. She noticed that he grimaced as he did.
“And what happens tomorrow?” He asked.

She squeezed his hand. "We get married."

Chapter End Notes

As always, show canon, not book canon, so the Valyrian blade is silver not dark.
Memories

Chapter Notes

Here be mentions of threatened sexual assault and graphic descriptions of injury during that journey to Harrenhal. Nothing worse than the show, but a warning seems appropriate.

BRIENNE

Brienne made her way down from the fortress to find the camp still busy, despite the hour. The air was filled with an aura of excitement and the sounds of camp life - men and women talking and laughing around low fires, cups and decanters knocking, swords clashing, armour jangling, the occasional sound of rutting. These were familiar, almost comforting sounds now. She smiled as she made her way through it all to her pavilion. Smiled at the men, at the knowledge of her successes, and at the memory of Jaime. *Jaime. Alive and well and waiting for her.*

A young squire - someone’s nephew, she seemed to recall - helped her remove her armour, and then she crawled into the simple camp bed. *I should have chosen Jaime’s feather one,* she thought, even though she knew that would have been foolish. She still had something of a reputation to maintain. *One more night.*

Still, sleep eluded her, and she tossed and turned, her mind whirling with dreams and possibilities for the future. Finally, as the camp fell into silence, she found her thoughts wandering back to the past, and when she first met Jaime Lannister.

It had been dark when she first saw him. He had been caged and chained to a post in Robb Stark’s camp, an iron ring around his neck and stinking bucket in the corner, but his bright eyes and white teeth had pierced the blackness. When she had gotten closer, she had seen he was covered in grime, lank hair falling over his cheeks, rags hanging off his emaciated frame. His voice, when he spoke, had been hard and mocking, and the words that fell from him were even filthier than his body. She had been instantly convinced that she had never seen nor heard a more disagreeable man. She was horrified that her lady would free such a creature, and distressed that she was going to play a role in it.

Sunrise, and the absence of the collar and bucket, had not improved him. They had started arguing from the moment she’d pushed him off the stolen horse and pulled the bag from his head. “You’re much uglier in daylight,” were the first words he had said. She should have replied, “and you’re much worse smelling”, because that was very true, but she’d only thought of the retort several hours later, while rowing and trying to ignore him.

Since then Jaime had claimed on many occasions to regret those words, but he hadn’t been in the least sorry at the time. He had been trying to provoke her, and, as he had not-so-subtly pointed out, it had worked. Everything about him had irritated her, from the smug arrogance to the lurid questions to the strutting walk. How could a prisoner on a leash be such a peacock? And his reputation? That had been so vile that she had heard of him on Tarth for more than his swordsmanship. *Kingslayer. Betrayer. His white cloak blackened like his heart.* While
occasionally willing to give people the benefit of the doubt, she had no reason to do so in his case, because she actually heard him snarkily confess to violating his sister and throwing a child to his death. She couldn’t have imagined it was even possible to hate someone more.

But that had changed. As the hours and the days and months and years passed, the man she had instantly, instinctively hated so vehemently had become her friend, then one of her best friends, her lover, and soon her husband. *The soon-to-be father of my children* too, she hoped. Telling those children how their parents met was going to be entertaining.

Her thoughts wandered back to the Riverlands. They had squabbled and fought throughout the trek, and there had been occasions when he had been so irritating that she had had to stop and chain him to a tree so she could storm off and get a moment of peace. He had eventually been clever enough to deceive her and steal her sword, and they had fought. The only time they had. *I was the last person Jaime had dueled with his right hand, and the last person he touched with it too,* Brienne remembered, with a strange combination of regret and pride.

And then they had met the Brave Companions. *The Bloody Mummers.* She rarely let herself remember *that* time. She was certain that Jaime would not want her to remember it, with all its associated humiliations. But how could she forget? The terror and torture of those few days was seared in her mind.

Unbidden, the memories flooded her. They begun, as always, with Jaime’s lie about her father’s wealth, his cries of “sapphires!” She can remember the immense relief she felt at being dragged back to the camp, after her revulsion at the bloody mummers’ hands on her body, ripping at her clothes. *The smell of them.* She can remember, too, the way, minutes later, Jaime had screamed as the arakh had fallen on his wrist. She’d screamed at the horror too, and fought against her bonds, and blinked and shook and hit her head against the tree and tried to wake up. But it wasn’t a dream from which he could ever wake up.

*His sword arm for my honour. His identity for mine.*

And thus their nightmare had truly began.

Jaime had still been screaming when one of the mummers cauterised the wound with a torch, the rest of them laughing along, even after he mercifully passed out. She had felt sick too, her ears ringing and the air thick with the scent of burning flesh and alcohol and unwashed bodies. Her stomach roiling, as her mind still refused to believe what had happened.

When it was done, they had dragged him back and tied him up again, next to her. *As if he could escape with that wound.* As if either of them could. She had been sure they would try to assault her again, then, as they approached. *If they will maim a lordling, why not rape a maid?* But they didn’t. The leader, Locke, had simply stood over her and said “if the kingthlayer dies, so will you, and then we with rape your ugly, worthleth corpthe.”

She had felt guilty, worthless and bewildered at the sight of Jaime, maimed and pale and shaking beside her. But she’d tried to focus on the practicalities. *Shock,* she had realised, *he is in shock.* And so was she. Ser Goodwin had taught her of it, “as deadly as any blade.” She had tried to remember her lessons, but her thoughts were like shadows, uncatchable. She’d had to take deep breaths to calm herself and *think.* She had finally remembered she needed to get his legs up, so she’d floundered desperately and made a mound of dirt and sticks and refuse to do so. Then another, Rorge, had kicked her for making a mess, and things had gone black for a time.

Later, Jaime had started to wake, and she’d been up and beside him. He had started to retch, and she had rolled him onto his side as he emptied his stomach of his meager dinner, followed by the
stinking remains of lunch. The vomit had stuck to his beard, and she’d ripped off a strip of her shirt and wiped him clean as best as she could with cloth and spit. He’d lain prone as she did, staring at her with confusion, disbelief, and, eventually, something that may have been gratitude. *Gratitude from a Lannister.* It had been hard to believe. She had just finished cleaning him when he leaned his head over and was sick again. Green bile and blood.

“Hurts, hurts...” he had moaned. *So it must,* she thought. Seared flesh and bone. It had smelt too, of burned skin and hair. The flesh was seared over the wound, but it was already enflamed. She’d had no milk of the poppy, no willow bark, to give him. Someone yelled at him to shut up.

Soon after he had started shaking, shivers at first, then violent tremors. Brienne had nothing to cover him or keep him warm. She’d settled for lying closer, beside him, and hoping that the heat of her body wold help him stay warm.

*I had thought of putting my arms around him,* she remembered, but it had not seemed right. *The bloody mummers would have howled with laughter, and I hardly wished to increase his humiliation.* That she had truly thought, then, that for Jaime to lie in the arms of her ugly self was a worse fate than shaking with shock and cold filled her with her own sense of frustration and shame.

During that night, or maybe the next, Jaime had started crying. Quiet, gasping sobs. He had continued until one of the men, an Ibbenese thug, had told her to stop her babe from squalling or he would need to punish it. Jaime had been quiet after that, but she remembered him quivering with silent whimpers as she lay beside him, afraid to sleep, afraid to touch him, just afraid, and praying that he would stay quiet. When he whimpered his own prayers, to gods she knew he didn’t believe in, she had shuffled closer and laid a hand on his arm. He fell silent again at her touch, and she had stayed still and stared at the stars. Hoped that he had gone away inside and wished she could do the same.

The morning after they took his hand, the mummers had made a necklace of it and placed it around his neck. He hadn’t even protested. She had wondered idly, sickeningly, if they had some purpose for keeping it, if a maester could reattach it if Lord Tywin found enough gold. But she knew, deep down, it wasn’t possible. Jaime must have known that too, known that the hand was intended as naught but a taunt. As they prepared to decamp, she had helped him rise, and held him upright as he swayed and nearly fainted. Another small humiliation, she had continued to hold him as he struggled with his breeches to make water, his face red from tears and stress and pain and embarrassment. When the mummers weren’t looking, she’d squeezed his arm again, the only comfort she could give. He’d nodded almost imperceptibly, an acknowledgment of some kind. Maybe a thank you, maybe just indicating his willingness to take the next intimidating step.

They had made her lift him onto the horse, and only then, with her hands on his hips, had she realised how little he weighed. She could feel his bones. He mumbled his thanks, but had almost immediately fallen off the other side, then screamed with pain when instinctively used his injured arm to brace his fall. The bloody mummers had laughed and jeered and giggled some more. She had moved to the other side of the horse, helped him again, and this time placed his hand on the pommel. The right stump was thick with mud and blood that seeped through the bandage.

“Your sister needs you, Jaime. Hold to this as if it were her memory,” she had said, not knowing what else to offer. He had looked at her from under his hair, eyes blurred and dull and silently questioning. "*What good will I be to her now?*” Still, he had held on, at least for a little while.

He had been only half-conscious on the ride, and in his delirium he had soiled himself, much to the delight of their captors, who screeched about having proof that the Lannisters did not shit gold. It had fallen to Brienne to clean him, and she had little choice but to remove his breeches and
small clothes, and discard the latter, unsalvageable, in the forest. She hadn’t seen a man’s private parts up close before that moment, and certainly never touched them, and despite her attempts to avert her eyes and go away inside, Septa Roelle’s warnings of sin and despoilment echoed in her head as she tended him. *Soiled, you are soiled.* The mummers had jeered and made comments about licking him clean and she had to block them from her mind too. She had done her duty and cleaned him as best she could, again ripping linen from her shirt and gathering saliva from her dry mouth to dampen it. By the time she was done, she was running out of both shirt and spit. She had been glad that, by that stage, Jaime was unconscious.

He fell from his horse again that day, or the next. Maimed, sick, near delirious, he’d bravely and stupidly tried to seize a sword from the dornishman, and had ended up beaten and unconscious in the mud. She’d felt the first beats of admiration for him then, watching that last, desperate attempt at escape. *He didn’t lack for courage.* She’d gotten herself a bruised eye and a good winding trying to rescue him too. From then on, until the final approach to Harrenhal, they had been tied together. She grew used to the press of his body, to his soft cries and groans and swearing, if not the putrid smell of his rotting hand and the foulness of his breath.

The night after he had fallen in the mud, they had camped beside the river. She had taken him down to the water, under guard, to clean the mess from him. Mud and vomit, shit and piss. He was awake that time, his face taut with pain and mortification and despair. She had tried to be matter-of-fact and perfunctory, aware of his burning humiliation, but he had needed so much assistance, even to get undressed, to stand. She had started with the breeches, helped him untie them, strip them off.

“Usually this happens under much more desirable circumstances…” he had said, apologetically, his voice harsh and cracked, as her fingers worked the knots.

She’d given him a wan smile, relieved to see a little humour, and then she had helped him walk into the river. They’d both hissed at the cold of the water, and he had clung to her, shaking and weak. As she had bent down to scoop water up and over him, she had seen his eyes gaze longingly at the cool depths.

“You will drown if you try,” she had whispered, guessing his intent. “Or take an arrow in the back.”

“No talking!” screamed their brave companion guard, although the best he could do was throw a rock in their general direction. His bravery did not extend to entering the cold water to beat them.

But Jaime had still looked like he thought drowning was a good option, so she had held him tighter, suddenly afraid that he would let the water wash him away. She had been relieved when, minutes later, he had stumbled and near fainted against her again. She had taken him back and left him on the shore, and turned to wash his clothing. She then had no option but to wiggle the breeches back on him, wrung out but damp. She had done the same with the shirt, picking him up to ease it off his shoulders to wash. His ribs were visible beneath the fine layer of hair on his chest, and she had decided to give him some of her rations, lest he starve to death, although deep down she had known that his stump, by then stinking and puss-filled and red, was likely to kill him first.

*Why do I care?* She remembered wondering. He was the kingslayer, a man of infinite evil and minimal honour. Was it not fitting that he lost the hand that killed his king? That pushed the boy? That had so unnaturally touched his sister? But try as she might she had not been able to convince herself that Jaime Lannister deserved to be maimed by that scum, let alone that he deserved to die. In any case, she’d had a duty to care for him and bring him home safely. *Nothing more,* she’d had
told herself. *But also nothing less.*

Still, she had *cared,* she can recognise that now. Even then she had seen something in Jaime, a kindred spirit beneath the armor of insouciance and arrogance. He was someone she had wanted to care for and save.

*You were so gentle then,* he had told her once. *More gentle than I had ever known.*

That had surprised her. But it had pleased her too, that she could be thought of as gentle. Sometimes, she wondered if that gentleness was a reason why he loved her, perhaps even *why* he had fallen in love with her. Not for her skill at arms, the honour and bravery that she tried to embody, and certainly not her beauty and wit, but because of the gentleness she had shown him when he was injured and vulnerable and sick. The care she had given him when he was lost in the dark. Wasn’t that what men wanted? Gentle, kind women? Women who nurtured them? Women who would be good mothers.

She didn’t know how she felt about that.

*I wasn’t always gentle,* though she remembered. *Gentleness did not always work.* Despite her best efforts, within a few days of losing his hand, Jaime had began to fade, inside as much as out. The third, maybe fourth night, he’d all but given up.

“What are you doing?” she had asked, as he forsook his food and stared at the fire.

"I’m dying,” he had answered. Honest, resigned.

At that, her heart had filled with rage. She’d told him he couldn’t die, that he needed to live, to take revenge. But he replied that he didn’t care about revenge. Well, perhaps not, but she did. She wanted justice. If not for him, then for every person those foul creatures had wronged. For all the smallfolk who were not in the position to seek the justice Jaime Lannister could.

"You coward,” she’d spat. “A little misfortune and you’re giving up."

He’d been shocked. "Misfor… Misfortune?"

"You lost your hand."

"My sword hand. I was that hand."

"You have a taste, one taste of the real world where people have important things taken from them, and you whine and cry and quit."

*Hard love.* Well, not love, not then, but she *had* felt a strange, uneasy kind of affection. He had appeared to take that in, and had began to pick at his food. She had been relieved that he wasn’t going to leave her alone, that he wouldn’t let Locke win, that he was going to *live.*

*But that wasn’t the only night be had decided to die.*

Years later, there was another. That horrible night in the courtyard, at Winterfell, when he had withdrawn from her and ran.

*I should have realised,* she thought, *that Jaime Lannister is not always a fighter. When confronted with personal loss, he finds excuses, withdraws, retreats into himself, or panics and forces people away.*
That is what he did when he heard what happened to Cersei. Brienne can recognise that now. He had assumed the worst, talked himself into accepting it, panicked, and fled. *I should have gone after him when he left. I should have ridden him down and told him to be brave and insisted on staying with him, or going with him, or at least talking through what he thought he was doing. I should have knocked him off that horse.*

*But what difference would that have made?* She doesn’t know, but she meant it when she said she did think he could have done anything differently. What would have happened had he stayed with her in Winterfell, while Kings Landing burnt and Cersei died alone? Would he have moved past it, stayed happily with her, in their warm bed? Or would his guilt over his dead sister, the possible baby, the city he had sacrificed so much for, have eventually destroyed him, and them, anyway?

She feared the latter, that some spark from the fires of Kings Landing would have smoldered away beneath them, reducing their relationship to ashes just as surely as the dragon did the Red Keep.

*It’s in the past now, anyway.* Like the rest of their time at Winterfell, the Long Night, the bloody mummers, the baths at Harrenhal, Joffrey’s dreadful wedding. She didn’t want to dwell on the past, not when she could now see a future instead, albeit one that was still somewhat indistinct. But, oh, it was easy to dream. She imagined herself and Jaime, in a meadow, arm in arm, surrounded by golden-haired children. Imagined him smiling indulgently at the children’s antics, then drawing her head down to kiss her and -

*I’m acting like a silly girl,* she scolded herself, but she didn’t care. In the darkness of the night, it was easy to get carried along on hopes for the future. The morning would no doubt cast a harsh light on the practical realities, on her duties and her doubts and the niggling fact she was still Lord Commander, with oaths to keep to a king in Kings Landing. But for now, she could dream.

She imagined Jaime taking her in that field, his hands on her arms and hips, then holding her legs, his mouth on her neck and breasts, his cock deep inside her as he cried and thrust and spilled. She dreamed of holding him as he trembled in the aftermath of taking his pleasure, remembered the feel of him softening inside her, her hands on his lean, muscled back and his face and breath against her neck.

After that, she slept.

When morning dawned, she found herself too busy to give much thought to her future. She was barely awake, and still wiping sleep from her eyes, when the morning mustering out of the men began. It soon proved to be a frustrating exercise. Looking through the list of names and recruits, she could identify nearly the precise moment that Tywin died, and Cersei appointed Daven the Warden of the West, by the sudden deterioration in record-keeping.

*“I’m a man of action, not a scribe,”* Daven grumbled, after she had fixed him with a look that marked him for death.

*“The scribe was a scribe and he should have been scribing,”* she had answered irritably.

The soldier who stood before was the latest consequence of that. He claimed to have brought his own sword to the war, but she had no record of that one way or the other. Still, what was the point of being angry, really? Daven had made no secret of not wanting the position, and had done the best he could. His version of recruiting probably involved a barrel of beer and a press gang.

In the end, she reluctantly let the soldier keep the sword, even though she could not imagine how he had come upon it. She hoped he didn’t turn bandit. *I suppose we’ll deal with him if he does.*

The pay records too were a mess, but luckily there were few problems gold and silver couldn't
solve, and despite everything, the Westerlands still had reasonable reserves of both. She paid all
the men a fair sum, ultimately giving many the benefit of the doubt about the length of their
service. *The problem is not silver, but food*, she reminded herself. Coins was not like to do the men
much good if there was nothing to buy with it.

The same problem would affect the kingdom as a whole shortly. The foodstores from the Reach
had been destroyed, several subsequent seasons of planting lost to the chaos of war, and there was
already talk of famine approaching in the Reach and Crownlands. The Westerlands had stores, but
barely enough, and all the gold in the treasury could not purchase what did not exist. They would
need to look east for supplies, to Essos. No doubt her father would leverage some benefit out of that
for Tarth.

*My father.* She hoped he was well, and resolved to write to him again. *Write to him about Jaime.*
She needed to write to Sansa, too, and Tyrion. Not Pod, she’d see him again soon enough, and he
was not like to read a letter unless he had too.

The final camp dinner, that night, was a basic affair befitting the reduced resources - hardbread, a
hearty stew with with pork, stringy beef, and jellied vegetables - but at least the ale was plentiful.
The camp had been largely deconstructed, but the men and many camp followers seemed
unconcerned. They sat in groups on makeshift benches and on the ground, or stood around talking.
Others left quickly.

As the meal was served, Jaime made his way down from the fortress. She and Daven awaited him
at the edge of camp and watched him approach on his white horse, surrounded by a small company
of Lannister guards. Mounted, he looked every inch the lord, dressed in his red and gold Lannister
armour. It had always struck her as rather garish, although it wasn’t quite the *most* ridiculous she
had ever seen - that honour belonged to Mace Tyrell and his roses and blue plumage. She hated
roses. She seemed to recall that the younger Jaime had been known for his vanity and outlandish
clothing too. Sansa had described to her the flamboyant shiny coat, tight pants, high boots and
floppy hair he’d worn on his first trip to Winterfell, and she’d actually laughed. It was hard to
reconcile that with the Jaime she knew, the man of coarse clothing from Harrenhal and Winterfell,
and military simplicity at Kings Landing and Riverrun.

Truly, it was in many ways hard to reconcile Lord Lannister with her Jaime, period. She had
grown to know *her Jaime* in smaller, more intimate spaces, where it was often just them. Even
during their time together at Kings Landing, their encounters had usually been away from the
courtiers and crowds, often on that walkway by the sea. Sheltered from his sister and her scheming
eye, from Varys and his plots and Lord Tywin and his judgement.

*But I was not always safe from Cersei.*

“But you love him,” the queen had said to her, at the Purple Wedding.

It had been a taunt, an exercise of power. *Cersei had recognised my love for Jaime, even then, and
she used it to hurt me, even if it had amused rather than threatened her.* The pronouncement had
terrified and humiliated her. *Does he know?* She had wondered. Her fervent, painful hope had been
that Cersei stayed quiet, that she did not tell Jaime, or at least that, if she did tell him, he did not
mock her like the rest of them did.

Yes, she had loved him then. Loved him even more so when he gifted her the armour and the
sword and even her squire. But it had been an impossible love, and while leaving had torn her
heart apart, she’d also been relieved to be away from Kings Landing and Cersei and the entire
dangerous world of which he was a part and she was not and could never be.
Riverrun has been the first time she had really seen him command, the first time she had truly seen Lord Lannister. Fierce and bold and ruthless, respected and admired too. He had been so removed from the ragged figure at Harrenhal, the sarcastic lordling at the Red Keep, as to be almost a different man. It had given her a whole new respect for him, even as she’d recognised, with a kind of sadness, the seemingly insurmountable distance between those parts of their lives.

But now those parts of Jaime were converging around her. She was marrying her Ser Jaime and that Lord Lannister and she’d need to get use to them both.

Jaime drew his horse to a halt before her and Daven. He looked magnificent, a lion. But as he dismounted she noticed that his armour hung off him too loosely, and his hair was more silver than gold. He landed a little tentatively, and there was a stiffness in one leg when he walked toward them. He was still not well. *He’d been sitting last night, so I barely noticed.*

“Good to see you, coz,” Daven smiled broadly. Jaime returned the grin, and when he reached his cousin, he hugged him. Daven added a manly backpat, somewhat awkwardly with the gaudy pauldrons in the way.

Brienne stood beside them, uncertain, but then Jaime turned to her and beamed.

“My Lady Commander,” he greeted her. Then, a little nervously, he reached for her hand, drew it to his lips, and kissed it. Brienne half gasped and half laughed in surprise. It was a public announcement that she was his lady, his betrothed. She could feel the camps’ collective eyes on her.

Daven genuinely laughed. “Fuck, a brush with death sure taught you manners. Our lady here couldn’t have looked more shocked if you’d snogged her square on the lips.”

Jaime threw him a sarcastic look. “I’ve always had manners, coz, you were just too crude to recognise them.”

The cousins fell into an easy banter, as together they wove through the crowd, thanking the men. Brienne was content to follow behind as they led. She loved the responsibility, strategy and work of being in command. But this part, this *after* - the casual conversation, the jokes and informal connections - she had always found more difficult. *Sometimes more terrifying than the actual battle.* She had never been suited to it. She could talk to a man one to one, inquire as to his well-being, ask about his family, but as soon as another joined them, she would lose her chain of thought, grow uneasy and tongue-tied. Crowds made the situation unbearable.

Jaime, however, was in his element, charming and boisterous and commanding in turn. She thought she saw some reticence or perhaps unease among a few of the officers, but most were welcoming and some were amusingly and obviously obsequious. Jaime played a little with the latter, like a cat with a mouse, but with no baring of claws. There was none of the disdain he was used to in Kings Landing. She wondered whether news of the trial had reached here, and if it had, whether these men didn’t care, or were simply wise enough to feign ignorance while in the presence of their notorious lord and his likely lady. It was impossible to know.

By afternoon, the mood was festive, and Brienne met with Daven and Ser Lyle Crakehall - “call me Strongboar” (she didn’t) - to make arrangements for the accommodation of those men who weren’t mustering out. Ser Lyle couldn’t wait to tell her what were likely greatly exaggerated stories about his younger days with Jaime, and then about the wight. The later she needed to think on more.

As dusk fell and the camp emptied, Brienne started to feel uneasy. Too many men would likely
spend their pay in Lannisport that night and return to their families empty-handed. Still, there was little she could do about that, and their lives were their own to live. She sighed, and started to get ready. Tonight, she would rest (or not, for she wasn’t anticipating much in the way of sleep) in the fortress, and the tingly feeling of expectation was already distracting.

When she returned to her tent, there was a scroll waiting for her from King’s Landing. She picked it up cautiously and began to read. Reality had found her.

JAIME

“I was hoping to simply find a septon, say some words, swap cloaks and be done with it,” Jaime said, pouring a generous serve of arbor gold into a cup, and passing it to his cousin. “But turns out it is not quite as simple as that.”

“When is anything ever simple?” Daven asked. He looked at the wine and grimaced. He was more of an ale man. “I wouldn’t have thought she was the ‘extravagant wedding’ type though.”

“She’s not, but I found out that no septon, not even one sworn to House Lannister, will marry the heir to Tarth without her father’s express permission. Not even to a Lannister. The Lannister who pays for their upkeep.”

Daven snorted, and wine flew out his nostrils. He laughed. “Did the septon tell the Commander directly?”

“The craven coward made me do it.”

“Fucking hell.”

“Wasn’t the best part of my day,” Jaime admitted, as he sunk into the chair. He remembered the scowl on her face as he’d broken the news to her in the camp, before fleeing back to the Rock. “Anyway, I have written to the Evenstar, which I told Brienne I would do and I should have done anyway. I’m not sure what I’ll do if he says ‘no’.”

“He won’t. He won’t want to piss off the Lannisters, or his daughter. And she’s not exactly pristine now, is she? So by fucking her you may have lowered her prospects enough to make yourself worthy in her father’s eyes.”

Jaime frowned, pondering for a moment whether he should punch his cousin for the crudeness. Still, he had dishonoured her, even if she had been more than willing, and his coz was undoubtedly correct that the only reason the upright and formidable Lord Tarth would even consider his notorious self as a match for his daughter was because he had effectively already claimed her.

In any case, it was hard to take offence at anything Daven did. He was crude and rude and not very Lannister like, but at least he was broadly good natured about it, which was more than he could say about Tyrion of late. Of Cersei or father ever.

Jaime shrugged. “I’ll take a yes, however I get it.”

“How the mighty have fallen.” Daven drowned his cup. “No big wedding then?”

“Unfortunately, there may be. Assuming a month to get a reply from a Lord Tarth, there is now enough time for it to become a typical Lannister affair. Also, Aunt Genna’s got wind of it.”
“Fuck me. Who let that happen? It’s only been a day…”

Jaime went to reply, but was stopped by the sound of a cough behind them. Both men turned to see who it was. Brienne stood in the doorway.

“My lady…Commander…” Daven said quickly, rising to his feet. Jaime was slower, struggling up next to him.

Brienne waved her hand dismissively. “We’re off duty, Daven. Just ‘Brienne’ is fine.”

“Brienne, then,” he smiled. Then he looked at his cup. “Well, now you can entertain my needy coz, I’m making a hasty exit to go and get a proper drink.”

“Don’t leave on my account…” Brienne began, watching the large Lannister deposit his cup on the table.

But Daven shook his shaggy head. “Been waiting for you to get here for too long already,” Daven winked at her. “Thanks for saving my butt, and stomach, again, my lady. You, coz…” he turned to Jaime, scowling at the goblet, “can take your fruity cat piss and stuff it somewhere that you don’t have to taste it.”

“Piss off, Daven,” Jaime called after him, but the other man just laughed a hearty laugh as he left.

And then they were alone again. Jaime looked up at his soon to be wife. She was dressed in simple linen breeches and a loose shirt, her hair loose and curling about her ears. Not slicked back. Good.

Still, she looked pensive, which was not a good sign.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, still standing. He was almost afraid to ask. He took a step toward her, arm out to touch her.

Brienne sighed. “There was a raven waiting for me. From his Grace. He has summoned me back east.”

Jaime started, felt a little trigger of panic ran through him. No, no, no, no, no.

“I don’t wish to be parted again,” he said quickly. “Not ever, but especially not now. You only just got here…”

“I know, but I need to go, Jaime. But we both have responsibilities. Mine are still in Kings Landing.” She cast her eyes down to the ground as she spoke, and he could hear the conflict in her voice, the uncertainty, but also the resigned determination.

He frowned. It was still unbelievable how well last night had gone, and that Brienne had been willing to forgive him so readily. But maybe she hadn’t? Maybe she’d lost her mind last night, and had regained it since, and she was having understandable second thoughts about this whole marriage to a Lannister proposal. Which would be entirely sensible, even if it would rip his heart out and then stomp it into the ground ...

“If you’re having second thoughts…” he began, giving voice to his fears.

She looked up at him, startled. “Of course not! No. But I had hoped we would be married quickly, and I could return and make arrangements, but that may not be possible. I’m still the Lord Commander, Jaime. I have duties and I have sworn an oath.”

An oath. Of course. So many fucking oaths.
Why did they make so many fucking oaths to people other than each other? *It had to stop.*

He frowned. “I forgot about that.”

Which was not entirely true. Really, he hadn’t forgotten about it so much as he hadn’t wanted to think about it. He wanted her here, with him, helping with the impossible task of putting the Westerlands back together. And, if he was being honest, at least with himself, he wanted her here with him to start their family, conceiving and carrying their future children. *Before she changes her mind. Before we are both too old.* Only he wasn’t quite sure how to broach that with her yet.

She smiled gently. It was still a rare and precious thing, to see her smile, and his battered heart melted. “Well, we had other concerns last night. But today the practicalities arose.”

*Always so annoying sensible.* He didn’t want any part of that sensible, not when it was ruining his happiness.

“Fuck practicalities, and fuck the King,”

“You realise he can hear you?”

“Yeah, well fuck that too.”

Jaime took a deep breath, and then went to pour himself a cup of wine. He held up a goblet, offered Brienne one, but she shook her head.

As he took a sip of the wine, he pondered the idea of Brienne in Kings Landing, sworn to protect another man. He liked it not. But if she wanted it … what could he do? Fuck, he was beginning to have some sympathy for how his father must have felt when he had joined the kingsguard.

“Do you intend to stay in the role?” He asked cautiously. “I have been told it is no longer a lifetime commitment.”

“No, I can resign. I had never planned on doing so quite so quickly, but I did not know …” her voice drifted off, but she pulled herself back. “Well, I thought you were dead.”

*Yes, there’s that.* The silence hangs between them, long and tense. *She believes she’s forgiven me,* he thought. *But there will always be this between us, my absence. We can never remove the memory of it, or the consequences.*

“But I will have to resign,” she said slowly, a little sadly. “We must be together, and you cannot be at Kings Landing.”

>No. That he could agree. After that trial, the wars and Cersei, court life at the Red Keep was definitely not for him.

And there was that feeling again, that sense that he was depriving her of something. That fear that he always took from her, reduced her. That he was ruining her by being with her, and that he was too selfish to stop it.

“I do have a successor in mind,” she said finally, clearly trying to raise the mood.

Jaime raised an eyebrow. “Pod is a little young...”

“Not Pod, no,” she indicated toward the door. “Daven.”

“Daven?” He almost laughed.
“He’s an excellent, soldier, a strong, loyal to a fault, and he wants to be as far away from his wife as possible. I can’t see a better choice for kingsguard, although perhaps not yet Lord Commander. I was going to introduce him to his Grace. Assuming you’re minded to release him. He is your bannerman.”

Jaime frowned. Releasing Daven wasn’t a problem, although he would miss him. But releasing Brienne to go with him held far less appeal. The journey back to King’s Landing would take weeks, perhaps months by the time they had factored in time at Court. He hated the thought of it.

He didn’t want Brienne to leave him again. He didn’t want to have to do this, be a lord, by himself. And he did not want to wait to get started. His whole life, up to this point, had led him nearly nowhere. As a kingsguard he had seen the deaths of four kings and a queen. As a father, he had seen all three of his children die. As a lord, he had never done anything lordly. He did have some military victories to his name, but he was also the famous loser of the Battle of Whispering Wood, had seen his men massacred on the Battle on the Gold Road, and had failed to do anything but nearly die at the Battle for King’s Landing. Only the Long Night truly stood out, and that only because he had been by Brienne’s side.

But Brienne is not your redemption, the Elder Brother had said. She couldn’t just drop everything in her life and become the savior of his. Besides, the kingsguard, even in its new form, was not the kind of thing one resigned by raven.

“I guess we have no choice,” he said finally.

Brienne sighed, frowned. “No.”

She walked over and joined him by the table, and then reached down and took his left hand, drawing it across her body, and leaning in against him. The closeness made his heart, and other parts of him, leap.

Finally, she said, “There’s another reason I want to go back, Jaime, and that is to talk to Bran about that wight.”

Jaime narrowed his eyes, and she said quickly. “Ser Lyle told me about it. Barely met him and he started singing your praises about killing it.”

“I see.” Well intentioned idiot. “What about it?”

“Jaime, I was at Winterfell and Daenerys was at Dragonstone when the plan to capture a wight was hatched. But, I was on Sansa’s war council when a decision was made to hold the meeting at the Dragon Pit, and the decision was made to withdraw from the Rock. Capturing a wight was a huge undertaking and they almost died. I never heard anything about capturing a second one, not once. And I don’t think that, even if they had, they would have left it in Casterly Rock.”

Jaime pondered the news. “Would they have kept it from you if they did?”

She pondered for a moment, and then shook her head. “Maybe if it was just to do with Casterly Rock. I think … well, I think Sansa knew about our friendship, perhaps Arya too because she knew about Oathkeeper. But I don’t see how I could not have heard about another wight. It wasn’t part of the plan, Jaime, I am sure of it. That thing didn’t come from Daenerys.”

He ground his teeth. “Then where did it come from?”

“I don’t know. But his Grace can find out, and he may look if I ask him.”
Jaime nodded. “All right.”

The pain the words wrought in him was worse than having a tooth pulled, and not far removed from having his hand cut off.

“I will be back in eight to ten weeks,” Brienne said, sadly. “I’ll leave your Aunt Genna here to organise that wedding.”

He laughed. But inwardly, he felt the world was crumbling around him again, the foundations shifting like sand. Without thinking, he pulled Brienne into his arms, drew her head down and kissed her, desperately. After a moment, he felt her arms move around him, and her body slide against his. He deepened the kiss, and she responded in turn, her hands ranging up his body to tangle in his hair.

“We have at least a night,” he whispered against her mouth. “Shall we put it to good use?”

She kissed him, capturing his words and breath. “Lead the way.”
BRIENNE

He ushered her through doorways and corridors, up first a grand winding staircase and then a narrow straight one. Casterly Rock was a rabbit warren of passageways and rooms. *And this is just one tower.* It was immense. Not quite on the scale of Harrenhal, but not so different either. Almost a city on a cliff. She wondered what the purpose of such a huge castle could be.

Jaime was babbling away as he led her through the corridors by the hand, running his mouth in that delightful way he did when he was nervous and didn’t want to think. Explaining the state of the place, talking about his plans for it. She barely listened to the individual words. His voice was smooth and enveloping, and she felt bathed in the warmth of it. *This is his home, and he’s proud of it,* she realised. He was almost enthusiastic, something she hadn’t seen him be, well, ever.

“It is very big,” she observed, during a break in this monologue. She really did not have any other words to describe it.


*Just not positive ones. Not yet, anyway.*

*And I will be mistress of all this,* she realised vaguely, as she stumbled up another flight of marble stairs.

“Over five thousand rooms,” Jaime continued. “But most aren’t used. Bad memories, out of style, badly lit, poorly heated, there’s a bullshit reason why every one is abandoned. Tyrion used to joke that our ancestors were so rich that if they didn’t like a room, they built a bloody new one, and I doubt he’s far wrong. Granted, my father was not like that. Had to squeeze the pennies out of him for a new shirt...”

*Jaime had spent his childhood here,* she mused, *surrounded by this immense wealth and privilege, knowing that one day it would all be his.* She couldn’t quite imagine such an upbringing. She had grown up in a castle too, the privileged daughter of a lord, but it was a much smaller castle, and not until she was in her teens had there been any suggestion that it would be hers. *It was to be Galladon’s, and then some unnamed future brother, and I was to be married and running someone else’s estate.* And even after that become unlikely, the castle was to be her husband’s. *And look how things turned out.*

Brienne wondered if her father was still planning on getting remarried. There may yet be a future brother, but if not, what then? She knew she was only Tarth’s spare, like the second sword you kept on the right hip in case of an emergency, but even so she couldn’t shake the guilty fear that by marrying Jaime, she was leaving her father without that backup. *Isn’t that why he wanted me to marry a knight of a good family, in need of land? So that he could live on Tarth and rule with me...*

She shook her head to clear the thoughts, and noticed for the first time where they were. Another marble staircase, narrower. This stone here was white, ribboned with rusty red streaks. *It could be from Tarth.* Tarth, with its green trees and blue waters and howling winds. Would everything remind her of it? A pang of homesickness joined the guilt. She was getting too emotional.
Still, her mind couldn’t help but wander and compare. Evenfall Hall was smaller, yes, but warmer, even with the bitter winds. And always so alive. The hallways busy with people and the courtyards bustling with the sounds of daily life. Her father’s castle, her home, was a courthouse, a market, a banquet hall, a meeting place, the activity centre of the local town. As dreadfully shy and aloof as she had been then, she had always enjoyed being able to watch. Casterly Rock, by contrast, seemed near deserted. Cold, aloof and imposing. Much like Lord Tywin, like Cersei, even like Jaime sometimes.

“Where is everyone?” she asked curiously. The quietness gave the hallways an eerie feel.

Jaime smirked. “Oh, here somewhere. But if there is one thing I am good at, it’s getting around this place without being seen.”

The reason why he knew how to hide in his own home hung between them for a moment, but Brienne let it go. One day she would examine her feelings about Cersei a little more, but not now. Instead, she pictured a youthful Jaime and a tiny Tyrion sneaking through the corridors, up to some mischief. She couldn’t help but smile.

Finally they reached a floor that was comparatively clean and dust free. They were standing on a landing, with two solid doors leading off adjacent walls. He gestured around, watching her expression as he spoke.

“This floor holds the summer apartments of the Lord Paramount and his wife,” Jaime announced, a gleam in his eye. That will be us, soon, he clearly meant to say.

“The summer apartments?” she repeated.

“You get the sea breeze on this side,” Jaime explained, in that tone of teasing, false defensiveness he’d used when giving her Pod. He pointed to one of the doors. “These were my mother’s rooms. I’ve taken father’s, for now. They’re right next door.”

She had heard that great lords and ladies had separate apartments, and some rarely saw each other outside of beddings. Her septa had instructed her that her Lord Husband would visit her nightly until her got a child upon her, and then he would look elsewhere until she had finished her confinement. It saddened her a little to think of Tywin and Joanna like that. Their love was legendary. But maybe it was just for show.

Jaime led her over to the nearest door, and noiselessly pushed it open. Cautiously, she entered the room and looked around. It was a sitting room, with a desk, chairs, a padded day bed and a small sitting area around a low table, likely designed for gaming. A fireplace was built into one corner, unlit due to the mild weather, and a seating area was cut into the window recess. She immediately imagined sitting in that window, reading. She wandered through to the next room. It had a large, high, four poster bed, covered in a blue quilt and many pillows. There was a desk and chairs and a comfortable looking padded bench, several trunks, and another window seat. A door led to a private garderobe. She could hear the crash of waves through the window.

The Lady Joanna’s room. Brienne had heard tell that she was very beautiful, calm and regal, and the room felt like that.

“It’s just as my mother left it. My father never changed it, and I didn’t know if you’d…” his voice drifted off. What was he going to say? Didn’t know if you’d like it differently? Didn’t know if you’d agree to stay. “Anyway, you can change it however you like. It’s yours.”

“It’s very beautiful. Thank you.”
He gave her a cocky smile. “My father ensured my mother had only the best of everything. You may as well benefit from that.”

She felt awed, and numb. “Your parents are said to have loved each other very much.”

A sad look passed across Jaime’s face. “I know what people think of my father, but whatever else he was, he loved my mother. He wasn’t the same after she died. I don’t think he liked coming back here. He would turn up, berate us, humiliate Tyrion and leave.” There was bitterness in his voice, but perhaps not as much as she would have expected. Jaime had clearly, perhaps inexplicably, loved Tywin. She still didn’t know what to think of that. *After all, Tywin was a monster.*

Jaime inclined his head toward a door on another side of the room. “Now, through here…”

He opened a door off the sitting area, and led her through a short passageway to yet another door. He pulled it toward him. This one opened into an even more grandiose bedroom, and Brienne audibly gasped.

“This,” he announced, ”Is the Lord Paramount’s room.”

Her mouth fell open. This room had an enormous four poster bed, draped in Lannister red and gold. *Jaime’s bed,* she realised. They both stared at it. They didn’t speak. It was surreal.

“Of course, when we’re married, I hope you’ll share it…”

His voice took on a husky tone, and he stepped closer to her. She could feel the heat of his breath on her neck, could hear herself breathing more heavily. A hot tingling rose in her chest. Jaime stepped in front of her and looked at her with eyes that burned like wildfire.

A bolt of desire, heavy and wicked, flowed over her.

*We are going to fuck.*

*In here. In his father’s old rooms.*

*Tonight.*

*He is thinking it now. I am thinking it now.*

The heat in her chest dropped and pooled in his stomach, and then lower. She felt a pull toward him, as if he held her by the chain she’d once used to lead him.

*We are going to fuck.*

And then a impulsive wave of panic washed over her. The room, the castle, him, what had transpired between them. *Lord Lannister.* It was almost too much. Too strange and different.

Suddenly, she missed Winterfell. The small, cozy room they had shared, with its straw on the floor and the fur-covered bed that was that little bit too small for both of them. Jaime, in his scavenged rough-shod clothing, with his messy beard and hair. The smell of leather and sweat, the wine that really wasn’t good. Her Jaime was the Jaime of winter and war, forests and hedgerows, of small spaces, intimate conversations, swords and wounds. This Jaime, the Lannister of Casterly Rock, while still Jaime, yes, was also that little bit different.

“I’m, um, I’m going to … clean up. In your mother’s … I mean my apartments,” she said quickly.
Before he could say anything, she fled back there, feeling his eyes on her retreating back.

She closed the door to the garderobe - the private garderobe - and leaned against it. The room had lime-washed walls and smelt of something sharp, probably used for cleaning.

The difference in their upbringings, their status, could not be, or feel, more obvious. She’d seen glimpses of his wealth and privilege before, at the purple redding, the luxurious camp at Riverrun. The Blue Armour. But seeing the reality of it was something else. And he takes it for granted. How was she ever going to live in this world?

The difference in their status was not the only thing making the acid in her stomach boil. Her mind was a riot of feelings, primary amongst them the longing she felt for Jaime. It was so consuming it almost obscene. It terrified her, stifled her judgement. She’d exposed herself so completely last time, and look at what had happened. There was guilt too. Guilt for caring so little for her role of kingsguard right now. Guilt for deserting her father. Guilt for her lust, her wanting need. Guilt for not waiting, again, until she was married. She explored that thought, but decided, no, she didn’t want to wait. Couldn’t. She had wanted this for too long. She ached for his touch. Yet she feared being torn apart again. I could not stand it again.

Yet, despite her desire, her nervousness was near crippling.

The first time had been together, Brienne had been too overwhelmed and too high from the alcohol to feel nervous for long.

He came to my room, she recalled. He was as uncertain as me. Apprehensive, maybe even scared of rejection. That had seemed strange to her, then. What woman would reject Jaime Lannister? Yet, he’d clearly been drinking for courage. He had thought, maybe, she would. Never.

It had been Brienne who had been bolder in the end. I was nervous only as long as I was uncertain, she recalled. Once I believed ... believed that he wanted me, I took what I wanted. What I had wanted for you so long.

I undid my shirt. Then I took care of his.

She smiled at the memory of Jaime, somewhat drunk, attempting to take his own shirt off with his one hand and his teeth. He’d succeeded mainly in tightening the knot, struggling pathetically but endearingly until she’d pushed his hands out of the way and done it herself.

He had kissed her though. Her first kiss. Before that night she’d struggled to conceive of what it would even be like, to press her mouth to another’s. She’d indulged in the odd fantasy, first about Renly, and then Jaime. Then only Jaime. She’d imagined something soft, gentle, the experimental touching of lips. But when that real kiss came, when Jaime lunged at her, it had been quite the opposite. Not gentle but forceful, not slow but fast. Hands and teeth and tongue. Consuming.

I just tried to keep up.

Once they had kissed, everything had seemed to happen at once. Half a decade of longing, released in a moment of desperate lust. She’d been lost admit the near disbelief that it was actually happening. Even memory of that night was overwhelming, consisting of flashes of images, emotions and feelings.

So many feelings.
The feel of Jaime’s chest against hers, the wiry hair and his warmth. Jaime pushing her toward the bed, and her dragging him there too. The back of her knees touching the bed frame. Jaime’s weight pushing her down onto the mattress, her arms around him, pulling him on top of her. His unsteadiness, the way he nearly fell on her, his muffled apology and their soft, drunken giggling. Her sudden gasp at the feel of his hardness against her hip. His grin, as he realised what she had felt, then his groan as he ground against her.

The way her head had buzzed, her hands had shaken, her body had filled with an exquisite desire, a burning need...the longing.

Jaime’s hand working at the laces of her breechers, while she undid is. The way he lifted his hips from hers so she could finish the job. How tight the knots were against the straining bulge beneath. The burning heat of him.

The glorious moment she pushed the breeches and small clothes down over his hips. Mine, at last. The liquid thrill inside her as she gazed upon his erect cock, stiff and straining for her. Wanting her. The wondrous feeling of knowing he, at least, desired her.

The way he had settled himself into the valley of her hips. The feeling of his hand on her thigh, raising her leg, wrapping it over his waist, opening her. The way he met her eyes as he pressed into her - “look at me Brienne, let me see you.’

The sharp, low pain, but only for a moment. The feeling of fullness, then completion. The near-agony of wanting in her chest, the needing in her groin, and the pride at what she could do to him.

Jaime above her. On her. In her. The ache between her legs. The thereunto unknown desire, confusing and frightening, for release.

Her hands, clutching and clawing at his back.

Her raising her other leg to pull him into her, hold him to her.

His half a dozen frantic thrusts. His face, agony and ecstasy, and his voice, strained and hoarse. His desperate cry as he came.

It hadn’t been quite what she expected. It hadn’t been life changing. It had actually been oddly frustrating, the sensitive place between her legs left tingling and straining for something. But it had also been enough. A taste of what was to come.

And the after. The after, when he had lain atop her, softening inside her, trembling, apologising to her (for what? she’d wondered), as she stroked him and told him it was fine. The after, when he had rolled off her and kissed her shoulder and told her he wished he was a younger man so he could have her again. The after, when she’d gone to sleep with him beside her. Every part of the after had been wonderful.

Then the rest got better too. So much better. Astonishingly, perfectly better.

And then he was gone.

Brienne didn’t know how long she stood there, before a gentle knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. She jumped.

“Jaime?” she asked.
“No, my lady,” the reply came in the soft voice of a girl.

She turned and opened the door to find a serving girl standing behind it, carrying a pitcher of water, a bar soap and a small pile of mint leaves. A pleasant looking little thing with large green eyes. *Some minor Lannister’s natural daughter,* she supposed. *Jaime must have summoned her from somewhere.* Or maybe she was always waiting here, lurking, ready to serve. Whatever the case, Brienne thanked her, a little red faced, and the girl blushed prettily herself and placed the items on the dresser by the door. The girl then made her way over the bed, climbed onto the stool at its side, and pulled down the covers.

*She is at least making a show of expecting me to sleep here tonight,* Brienne noted with some amusement.

“Will you be needing assistance undressing my lady?” the girl asked. Brienne couldn’t tell whether the tone was completely innocent or slightly teasing.

“No, no. Thank you.” She dismissed the girl, who left with quick curtsy. *That one is entirely too knowing.* It didn’t help the nerves.

Brienne quickly finished her ablutions. She washed her hands and face and used the mint water to freshen her mouth. Then she drew a deep breath, trying to calm her stomach, before turning back toward Jaime’s apartments.

He had, sometime while she was in the garderobe, closed the door between them. It was adorable. An attempt to preserve something of her reputation, even though she had no doubt everyone in the castle knew what was going on. Most were likely past caring.

When she returned to him, Jaime was sitting at the desk, a quill in his left hand, but he was not writing anything, just staring blankly at the page. *How long was I gone? Maybe he had given up hope?* He looked up as she entered, and then quickly stood up, dropping the quill.

“My lady… Brienne.”

His eyes had that hooded, hopeful, longing look that again reminded her of their first night.

She met his gaze, and instinctively licked her dry lips. Jaime took a shuddering breath, and moved out from behind the desk.

“I’m …” he began, but she shook her head to silence him.

She moved inside the room and closed the door behind her.

They stood and stared at each other, motionless except for the rise and fall of their chests

Then Brienne slowly reached up and began to pull at the laces of her shirt. Her hands were shaking slightly, like a squire in the moments before his first battle. Still, with care, she undid each of the laces. *Just like the first time, only somewhat more graceful.*

Jaime trembled slightly as he watched, although whether with nerves or a desire to keep himself in check, she wasn’t sure. The fingers on his good hand were clenched. As she finished with the last tie she looked up at him and met his gaze. His mouth was slightly open, and he was looking at her with such intensity she thought she would melt.

She pushed the shirt open, revealing the expanse of skin between her breasts, and her stomach.
Jaime groaned at the sight, and she smiled.

“Your turn.”

He looked back at her. The longing in his eyes transformed into an unbridled hunger, tempered with a little pride and conceit. He was a lion preparing to roar. He raised a hand to his collar, but once again the lacing would not come undone. He swore, then pulled the ties so hard that he ripped the collar from his shirt.

Brienne laughed, and Jaime looked chagrined. But just like that, the tension between them dissipated, and the undressing became a kind of game. They grinned at each other, a little madly.

She watched, still giggling, as Jaime pulled off what remained of his shirt, revealing his battered torso, with its ragged, puckered scars. She took a moment to examine him in the lantern light. He was still thin, more like he had looked at Harrenhal than Winterfell. Scarred and vulnerable. No golden hand, no prosthetic at all, just the stump. The hair on his chest was nearly completely grey. She wanted to tangle her fingers in it.

He was beautiful.

Her fingers flexed at the thought of touching Jaime, but she used them instead to reach up and lower her shirt from her shoulders, allowing it to fall to the ground, revealing her completely. *Again like our first night.* She watched with a sense of accomplishment as his eyes dropped from her eyes to her naked chest. It wasn’t much, she knew that, but it was obviously enough for him. He licked his lips, and she hoped it was at the thought of tasting her.

Certainly her cunt longed for his mouth.

She fumbled at the laces on her breeches. He did the same for a moment, before stopping, remembering the unspoken rules. *Turns. We are taking turns.* Brienne could see the bulge under the fabric in his pants. Hers were soaking. She leaned down and slid off her breechers and smallclothes. Jaime audibly swallowed. She stood up again, tall and naked before him.

“Gods, you’re killing me,” he groaned.

He struggled with his breechers for a moment, then pushed them off his reveal narrow hips. His cocked bounced up, hot and pulsing and straining for her. Helpless, she stared at it. then, suddenly, Jaime nearly toppled. He had to put one hand on the desk to balance, while he pulled off the breaches and boots.

She chuckled again. “Did you forget your boots?”

“Yes, yes,” he muttered. “You’ll forgive me if my mind was, temporarily, on something other than my clothes.”

“Forgiven.”

He finally got them off. Then naked - splendidly naked - he swaggered from the desk to the bed, manhood bobbing. Brienne watched the interplay of his lean muscles as he walked. He then turned and pulled the covers back, giving her a view of his perfect ass. Smiling, he looked back to her. It was an invitation to join him. It was not something she was about to decline.

She quickly covered the distance to the bed, and to Jaime, falling into his arms as soon as she was close enough. Their lips seared together, tongues duelling, and she pulled him flush against her, deepening the kiss, losing herself to it.
She broke the kiss, a little later, to climb back onto the bed. He clambered up after her. She thought, vaguely, how disconcerting it was to be so very high up, but the thought vanished, an irrelevancy, when Jaime pressed his body against her.

He didn’t bother pulling the blanket back over them. Instead, he lay next to her and stared at her for a long moment, his eyes exploring every inch on her. She curled her arms under his, and started to pull him on top of her, but he stilled her, pushed her hand down gently with his.

“Wait. Wait.”

He let go of her hand and ran his fingertips up her arm, her shoulder, down her side near her breasts, then back up again, over her shoulder, her neck, until he finally let it rest against her cheek. Her captured her gaze to his.

“Gods, I’ve missed you,” he said, voice low and husky.

She could only stare back at him, speechless.

“I’ve missed your lips…” he said, as he leaned down to kiss her again, gently and slowly.

“I’ve missed the curve of your neck…” Another kiss, just below her ear.

“The scars on your skin…” He ran his tongue along the marks left by the bear’s claws, sending sparks of pleasure straight to her groin.

"Your beautiful, pert breasts…” He leaned down and captured one in his mouth, suckling.

At the sensation, Brienne cried out and arched toward him, and she could feel him grin against her skin. Cocky bastard. He shuffled over to lie on top of her, breaking contact only to move his clever mouth from one breast to the other. His body pushed hers into the incredibly soft bed. She loved the press of his weight, welcomed it.

It is me who is strong enough, she thought with a sense of pride.

“I love your skin, your muscles…” he continued, as moved further down her body, licking and sucking a trail over her sternum, her ribs, the slight rise of her stomach, around her belly button. She moaned and raised her legs into the air and around him in anticipation.

She could smell her arousal in the air.

His lips were on her abdomen, then tracing the crease of each leg, where skin met the hair at her centre. He flicked his tongue and blew. He was torturing her.

“Jaime...please,” she whispered.

He looked up at her, over the blonde curls and the rise of her chest, and grinned even more broadly.

“And I missed your cunt,” he declared, leaning in to give her a long, exquisite lick. “The taste of you, how wet you get for me, the way you sound when I bury my face against you…”

And that is what he did. She released a long, primal moan.

Eventually he brought a finger, then two, to join his lips, probing and searching inside her until he found exactly the right spot. The spot only he knew about, that only he had touched. She groaned and screamed and came, her hands buried in his hair, and her thighs clutching his head.
She was still coming down, gasping and clutching at him, when he crawled up her body again, then sat up on his haunches, moved his hips into position, took his cock in this hand and pushed himself into her.

This time it was Jaime who moaned. Low and animalistic. A sound of pleasure and pain. He leaned down over her, resting on his arm and his stump, and put his mouth to her ear.

“And, most of all, I have missed this. Fucking you. Being in you. You are so fucking tight. There is nothing, nothing, like it.”

Yes, there was nothing like this. She couldn’t agree more.

She moved her legs to his sides, locked her ankles around his back, and urged him to move, and then to move faster and deeper. He groaned and swore with every thrust, losing himself in her. She just tried to keep up. His thrusts became more frantic, more irregular, and then she could feel him tensing, preparing to withdraw, but she held him hard.

“Stay with me,” she whispered to him. “Finish in me.”

And he did. He dove harder, grinding against her, as he came with a shout. She could feel him pulsing, and then thrusting deeper still, and then the sudden warmth of his seed flowing into her and out of her between their legs.

He collapsed, and lay on top of her for a moment, boneless and languid, as he softened. And then he worked his stump under the hollow of her back, and flipped them so she was lying across his chest.

For many long moments they lay like that, gasping for breath.

“I love you,” he whispered gently, when he had recovered enough to talk.

“I love you too,” she replied, laying a kiss at the base of his neck.

She fell asleep to the sound of his breathing and the slowing rhythm of his heart, his stump resting across her lower back. She was determined not to think about tomorrow.

JAIME

They both awoke later, to the rumble of a distant storm over the Sunset Sea. The air was thick was the heady smell of sex and cum and sweat, as well as the gentler scents of the lavender and rose water washed into the sheets. He felt languid, satisfied, safe. Home, he thought. I’m finally home.

Brienne lay on her side next to him, her back pressed to his chest, her eyes half closed, but her gaze fixed on the rain pouring down outside the narrow window. His good arm was draped gently around her waist, his hand resting on her abdomen, his fingertips just brushing the hair at the juncture of her legs.

I am hers and she is mine, he thought absently, stroking the soft skin beneath his fingers. And soon we’ll make it official. No Cersei, no Tywin, no war or Dragon Queen or white walkers left to stand in their way. All things considered, it was worth almost dying for. And the rest that had happened, before that? Well, he wasn’t going to think about it now, couldn’t think about now. But it had led him here, to this bed and this moment, and the very real possibility that he was, very possibly, actually happy.
"Were you happy here?" Brienne asked, sleepily, almost as if reading his mind. "As a child?"

He was surprised by the question, and not just because it echoed his thoughts. Brienne rarely asked about his childhood. Not that he could blame her, given most parts of it seemed to involve Cersei. But he wondered, too, whether she was thinking about his childhood for another reason. His seed was cooling within her. It could be planting itself in her womb, even now making a child. Their child. A child who would grow up here, in the vast halls of Casterly Rock, so removed from her home on Tarth.

She gently stroked his arm, not pushing him, just waiting for his answer. He thought carefully before giving it.

"Yes, I was happy here, mainly," he replied. "We were left alone a lot of the time. Cersei and Tyrion and I. Father was always in the capital, and we were raised by servants, some kinder than others, although none very loving. We … well, we found that in our own kind of love."

He felt her stiffen a little at that, and he gently kissed the back of her neck. He wasn’t ashamed of it, not really. He just wanted Brienne to understand.

"Was he harsh to you? Lord Tywin?"

He considered that, frowned.

"Sometimes. Father had high expectations for all of us, but he wasn’t there much to check. Some of the servants would save up our failings and report them to him when he did visit, and we’d be punished and taught to fear. But we didn’t do much wrong, not that father found out about anyway. The risks were always too high.

"But you loved your father." It was a statement, not a question. Still, he contemplated it for a moment.

"I suppose I did, yes. Yes. Although he would not have appreciated it, and might even have considered it a weakness. All that matters is family, he always said, and he would have preferred I channel my affection into a bloody banner and moto than show it to him. He was the kind of man who would rather have been feared than loved anyway, and that went as much for his children as it did his bannerman and smallfolk and rivals. He was tough, but not without reason, not to me. Tyrion, however? Perhaps he was petty to Tyrion, maybe controlling of Cersei…” Jaime fell silent. "I don’t know. But yes, I loved him."

Brienne nodded, her loose hair tickling his nose.

Jaime squeezed her closer, wondering what this was about, and then said, gently, "I won’t be like Tywin with our children. I promise."

She raised his hand to her lips and kissed it. "I know you won’t."

"And, courtesy of my family, I know what not to do."

She sorted. "I don’t. I don’t know anything about children."

"Yes you do. You did a great job with Pod!" He joked, muzzling her neck.

"He came walking and talking," she snorted. "But we’ll work it out."

He supposed that was what everyone did, wasn’t it? Work it out. Improvise.
The thought of Brienne pregnant, or with his child at her breast, stirred in him an even stronger than usual wave of longing and affection for his taciturn, somewhat grumpy, bloody terrifying soon-to-be wife. He kissed the back of her neck, felt the heat rise in his groin. He lowered his hand to gently stroke the top of her slit, fingers teasing her.

She sighed. Rubbed herself against him. He probed deeper, exploring her folds, finding the little bundle of nerves and tweaking it. Brienne moaned, and shuffled her butt back against him.

*Perfect.* He was immediately, fully, painfully erect.

“I think I’m done talking about my father,” he whispered in her ear. “And I am ready to try and become one again.”

He moved his stump from where it lay beside her, onto her stomach, *above her womb.* She wrapped her fingers around it, holding it in place. She then turned her head back toward him, and he accepted the invitation, capturing her mouth. He kissed her gently, as she sighed into him.

“I want to see your belly swell and become big with child,” he whispered to her, when they broke the kiss to breathe. His lips traced her cheek, her ear, then back to her mouth.

He continued to rub her clit for a few moments. Then he moved his hand back from her folds, dragging her slick over her stomach, in order to grab her hip and pull her ass even closer against his groin and his aching cock.

“And I want to see you writhe and moan and *come* while we make it…”

Brienne gasped, sending a ripple of delight through him. He ground against her, couldn’t stop.

The passion took hold of him, and he captured her lips again. He was ravenous, nearly devouring her. As he kissed her, his hand continued its exploration, fingers tracing the muscles of her flank and buttocks, and then slipping between her legs from behind.

“Gods, you’re wet.”

He stroked her gently, spreading her slick and exploring her folds, and she writhed and moaned beneath him, just as he wanted. His fingers found her entrance, and he gently pressed inside.

“May I?”

She hummed her pleasure, and then raised her leg to give him better access. He withdrew his fingers, wrapped them around the base of his cock instead, and then guided himself into her again.

*Gods, the feel of her. Hot and tight and inviting. Home.* His hand clasped as her breast as her began to thrust against her. In, out, in. His cock pulsed and strained as she clenched around him and grunted in pleasure. He lowered his hand to her clit. It didn’t take long before he felt her stiffen, her walls fluttering around him as she cried her release. He followed three thrusts later, spilling inside her again with a throaty moan.

After, satisfied and complete, he lay still against her, with his hand still buried in her folds. She closed her legs to hold both him, and his seed, inside.

He wished she could hold him to her always. He never wanted to leave.

The next morning came too soon. They both faced it with trepidation, but also with resignation. Her return to Kings Landing was unavoidable, and they just needed to get it done as quickly as possible so they could get on with their lives.
Brienne was almost dressed and gone the next morning when Jaime dragged her back to bed, pushed her over it and entered her for a final time, hand and stump on her hips as their cries lost to the sound of the morning rain and the crashing of the waves on the rocks below.

After that, he farewelled her in the courtyard to the castle. After she rode out the gates, he climbed the battlements to watch her small band until they were too small to distinguish from the others making their way along the road to Lannisport.

Jaime had contemplated riding to the docks with her, but it served little purpose other than dragging out the painful separation, and in any case, he was concerned he’d make a fool of himself saying goodbye, and just in case preferred to do so in a private place. In the end, he hadn’t disgraced himself. In fact, he’d done rather admirably. He’d kissed her hand and held her horse and then stood and stared like a besotted squire as she rode out through the gates, casting furtive looks at him over her shoulder. *Not all that different to our farewell in Kings Landing,* he thought, sadly. _Only this time at least I know she’ll be back._

Then, once he was sure Brienne was gone from sight, he got to work.

He summoned his council, or what there was of it. A half a dozen bannerman, and his formidable Aunt Genna. She claimed a stool at the council with an imperious look that brooked no dissent. No one dared question her. They discussed resources and provisions and men and training. The consensus was there was never enough of any of it.

Ser Harys raised concerns about the honesty of numerous bailiffs and sheriffs, many of whom were appointed by Cersei in seemingly random fashion. The law books were a mess, fines uncollected, trials delayed or abandoned. He agreed the make justice a priority, after he found scribes to manage logbooks and keep records.

Jaime would usually have found it all brain numbingly boring, but on this day at least it was a blessed relief from pining over Brienne.

That afternoon he held the manorial court. He listened to his stewards and his bannerman as they recited request after request. A village needed a well. Another wished for assistance in establishing a new irrigation system. A third town requested assistance with the engagement of an architect and masons for a replacement bridge. Jaime allocated what resources he could to help, where he thought it appropriate. At the insistence of the carter’s guild, he also ordered the road to Riverrun recleared and the Goldroad better maintained.

_There will be little coin left for this wedding. Aunt Genna will throttle me, even as Brienne thanks me with kisses._

The final petitioner for the day was not a commoner, but a knight, an envoy from Lord Tytos of Hornvale.

“Ser Roben of House Brax,” the envoy introduced himself.

Formalities done, Ser Roben shoved forward a terrified-looking man in his forties, dressed in peasant garb. The man immediately fell to his needs.

“He claims his lands and village were raided,” Roben said, an air of doubt in his voice. Then he addressed the other man. “Tell his Lordship what happened.”

The peasant farmer looked drained of all color, but he managed to spit out the words.

“I...I had a freehold land milord, in a small village, a day’s north of … north of…”
“Hornvale,” Roben offered. The man nodded. Jaime realised the village’s name was of no concern to this farmer. *Before now he had probably never left it.*

“It’s gone now. The village, my home, all of it. Men came riding up from east. They burnt our fields and our houses and the stables, butchered the animals, and left them for the crows.”

The story was not unfamiliar of itself. It could have been the story of any number of smallfolk, in any number of towns across the Riverlands, or the Crownlands, and indeed across much of the Seven Kingdoms. But that it should be happening *now,* with the war over, Casterly Rock reoccupied and the Lannister army home in the Westerlands, was surprising.

“Tell me more of these men,” Jaime demanded, firmly but not unkindly. “How were they armed? Were they armoured?”

The man nodded. “Aye, milord. Coated in dark leather, a little steal, and carried swords as long as me arm.”

Jaime nodded gravely. “You have done well, thank you. I will ensure you are fed.”

The man visibly shuddered. “Th...Thank you...” he stuttered.

Jaime turned his attention to the knight. “And what does Ser Tytos want of me?”

He could, of course, already guess.

“Assistance, my lord. Four hundred men, at least, to hunt down these outlaws and hang them.”

Jaime sent two hundred, under the command of Strongboar. Tytos wouldn’t like that, but fuck him. He needed someone he could trust, and Crakehall was his best option, so he was stuck here. Jaime was suddenly regretting allowing Brienne to take Daven.

As night fell, he ate his supper with Genna. She busied herself by offering him a summary of the court gossip of all seven kingdoms. He listened vaguely and grunted when appropriate and made the odd snide remark that made her laugh. How the fuck she could know any of it, let alone *all* of it, was beyond him. Presumably she listened at doors.

At the end of it, as she stood to leave, he heard himself ask. “How do you think I did? Today?”

She paused, hand on the door, and then turned back to look at him. A glimmer of a smile flashed across her generous lips, but it did not reach her eyes.

“Jaime, sweatling. You are a good man, underneath all that bravado. Better than you think you are, and certainly better than your father. But there is a part of you that wants to be liked, and that is a weakness. If you let these scoundrels see it, they will take advantage of you. You must not let them think you are weak.”

He looked at her curiously. “What do you suggest I do?”

She laughed. “I don’t know. What would Tywin do? Hang a few rivals?”

Jaime shook his head. “Arrange a couple of marriages, and hang the rivals at the wedding...”

Genna guffawed. She then peered at him, her head on one side, a gesture he knew he did on occasion.

“You cannot be Tywin, and you are not like to rule through fear, but you must ensure that, in your
determination not to be him, and not to be the person you fear you might be, that you do not become your grandfather either. You need to find that balance.”

“How do I do that?”

“That, I can’t tell you, my dear,” Genna sighed dramatically. Then she smiled. “But I do have faith that you will find it yourself. Perhaps with the help of that giant, righteous woman of yours.”

She opened the door and stepped through to leave, but gave a final glance over her broad shoulder. “Good night, Jaime. I will see you in the morning. Maybe it will have a better breakfast on offer than this morning’s.”

With that, she left, leaving Jaime alone in his chambers.

Outside, the rain poured down and thunder rumbled on the horizon.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is just about ready to go. Next day or so tops.
Returning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

JAIME

It was fitting, he supposed, that it was Brienne who had left this time. He’d fled Winterfell, she’d sailed away from him at Riverrun, and he’d sent her from Kings Landing.

_Gods, Kings Landing. After their return._ Those days seemed so distant as to be another life. Granted, he’d been missing a hand, but his father was alive, his children were alive, and Tyrion and Cersei and he were together. And all miserable in our own way, but weren’t we used to that? Misery or not, his memories of those days were filled with sun and light and colour. Colour that had faded by the last days of Cersei’s reign. The rainbows of the tourney ground. Red and gold for his family and the Keep. The green of the Kingswood and the gardens. The blue of the Blackwater Bay, beside which he had so often met Brienne.

Brienne. She’d seemed young then, although he supposed she wasn’t, really. Just innocent, idealistic, and naive in him, so obstinately determined that he would do the right thing. They’d spent weeks together, in the Hand’s Tower and down by the bay, talking, occasionally sparring, always arguing, as they recovered from their Riverlands ordeal. She had become a friend.

Yet as the weeks passed, he had come to the realisation that her presence in Kings Landing put her in danger. He had to send her away. Away from his family and their politics, and away from himself.

_Before I disappointed her._

_Before Cersei had her killed._

Cersei had never liked competition, of any type. _And she had never allowed others to play with her toys._

The trouble, he recalled, had begun barely three nights after he’d returned. He could still picture the scene, Cersei lying on her bed, looking particularly intoxicating in something diaphanous as she prepared, claws out, to attack.

“Did you fuck her?” She’d asked.

“Who?” he’d said distractedly, feigning ignorance, staring lasciviously at her breasts.

Cersei had rolled her eyes. “The tow-haired cow. She looks like she could use a good fuck.”

He’d been tired and confused and in pain. His wrist had still ached, he’d looked like a corpse and felt barely better, and all he’d wanted to do was forget all that and get inside her. But of course, Cersei was wondering if he’d found time amid the torture and starvation to screw around with his protector.

“She’s not interested in fucking, and I am not interested in her,” he’d assured Cersei. And at her frown, he had added. “There is no one but you, Cersei. Never.”
Then he’d taken her in his arms, and kissed her, and tried to make her forget about Brienne. Tried to make himself forget too. But he couldn’t, not when Cersei shrunk from his maimed wrist and insulted what he could do with his left hand and constantly reminded him that, for all her beauty and wit, she was also deadly and cruel. On the battlefield of court intrigue, Brienne wouldn’t have stood a chance against her.

And it turned out that Cersei didn’t forget Brienne either.

“She follows you around like a bitch in heat,” she’d told him on another occasion, as she picked over the remains of their lunch in her solar. “‘Grunts like one too.’”

He remembered the day, as well. He had given up on eating, because his clumsy, one-handed attempt was only making Cersei mad, and her plunging, red dress was making him hot, and he’d decided he’d rather forgo food than her. He’d been contemplating how long it would take to rip her dress off her, when the obvious reference to Brienne had brought him back to reality.

“She does no such thing,” he’d said firmly. “Let it go Cers. And come here.”

But she’d ignored both his outstretched hand, and his plea to let it go.

"People are laughing, you know, at the both of you, and how ridiculous you look together. Taena says she’s always been a joke. She says that the men at Renly’s camp had a bet - who would be the first to take her maidenhead. No one won because no one could go through with it ...”

Jaime had felt his gall rise, the thought of Renly’s preening wankers laughing about Brienne sparking an inner fury (which, granted, the lack of food and growing frustration had certainly not helped).

“Taena can fuck off, and so can the cunts in Renly’s camp. Lady Brienne is honourable and a maiden. She probably kicked their arses.”

He’d overstepped, and Cersei had smiled in victory. “‘Well, well, it seems I might be onto something...”

And perhaps she had been onto something, although not what she thought.

He hadn’t been blind. He knew that Brienne was fond of him, had even flattered himself that she was a little enamoured of him. Many women were, back then. But her affections had been innocent enough, and acting upon it was impossible for her as well as him. Still, he’d found himself uncharacteristically concerned for her welfare. He did not want her teased, or hurt.

“Leave her alone, Cersei. She’s no threat to you.”

“Of course she’s no threat to me,” Cersei had scoffed. “But she is an embarrassment. Sniffing after you like she has some kind of chance. Who does she think she is? Who does she think you are? Does she really believe that just because you’re maimed you’d sink to...”

“I said leave her alone!”

Hungry, angry and increasingly frustrated, he had slammed the gold hand onto the table, causing droplets of wine to leap from a goblet. Cersei had looked momentarily surprised, before her face adopted that same victorious, self-satisfied smirk.

She’d won, again, and she knew it.
He’d tried to fix it, but failed.

“We went through a lot together, Cersei,’’ he’d said, desperately, “I owe her my life. But there is nothing between us. I have never touched another woman. Just … let her be. Please.”

But of course Cersei would do no such thing. Not after that performance, anyway.

From that moment, he’d watched every interaction between Cersei and Brienne with deep concern. And he’d known Brienne had to leave.

He’d headed to the armourer the very next day, and spared no expense in commissioning new armour for her. He’d even given some thought to the design, advising the armourer on Brienne’s combat style and strengths and weaknesses. He’d paid extra for the blue. A good colour on her, he’d thought. It will match her eyes. For some reason that had seemed important, even though a small part of him had bristled at the idea of some other man noticing.

He’d had no idea, when he commissioned the armour, what he was going to do with her after he gave it to her. Assigning her to the gold cloaks was too dangerous with Cersei on her heels. But events transpired to give him solution, and so a week or so later he’d summoned her to the Lord Commander’s chambers, and given her his gifts by way of an awkward goodbye.

His sword, his armour, and his reputation and honour.

“I hope I got your measurements right,’’ he’d told her, as he’d whipped the sheet off the mannequin to show her the finished armour.

He’d been pretty bloody certain he had got them right, and indeed correct to the nearest inch. The image of Brienne standing before him, naked as her name day, water streaming down her lean, hard body, had been seared into his mind. He could have painted it, had he artistic talent and a working right hand.

He’d intended his tone, his mention of her measurements, to be slightly suggestive, but his pathetic attempt at flirting had gone right over her head. She’d only had eyes for the armour. And of course the sword.

“I almost forgot, I have one more gift,’’ he’d told her, as she’d looked uncomprehendingly at what he had already given her. “But, let's get you into that first’’.

She’d turned to stare at him then, virtuously outraged by his offer to help her put the armour on. He’d feigned exasperated amusement. “Oh for the gods’ sake, woman! It’s a bit late for modesty. I’ve seen it all already!”

She’d flushed and stammered, but eventually she’d acquiesced, and stripped off her doublet, leaving her tunic firmly in place. Then they had spent an awkward about of time trying to get her into the armour and adjusting it, using three hands not four. He could still recall the feel of her body under his hands as he had assisted her to fasten the buckles. The heat of her skin, her breath on his neck. The way his body had reacted to her proximity.

“Done!” he’d announced, when he did up the final buckle and took a step back. Not a moment too soon.

She’d turned, and looked up at him shyly, and he’d told her she looked formidable. Formidable, for f*ck sake. Still, she’d had actual tears in her eyes at that. He had wondered, still wonders actually, if she had ever been given another compliment about her appearance, even one as
inadequate as formidable.

After that he’d led her out to the Kingswood, and given her a horse, and Podrick Payne too (did the surly kid even remember that it was he who had sent him to his beloved ser?) and sent her on her way. To find Sansa, and to complete the quest that had brought them together. Accompanied by a squire who couldn’t fight and could barely ride, but not by me.

He’d known he was sending her into danger, and yet he’d been confident that she would be safer out there, looking for Sansa in the war torn Riverlands, than she had been in Kings Landing.

He’d watched her ride away until the trees had swallowed her, wondering how such an extraordinary creature had wandered into his life.

Only later, after she had left, had he started to wonder how he had let her wander out of it.

He had spent the rest of that day with his mind a revolt of images of firm muscles and pale skin, gentle hands, and huge blue eyes that looked at him with respect and trust. He’d ditched Bronn and avoided Cersei and returned to his chambers early. There, because he had to taint everything in his life, he’d lain in his bed and jerked off while imagining Brienne’s long, white thighs clenched around his waist as she surrendered her own honour to him.

Four years later, that dream had come true.

And then he’d fucked that up as well.

**BRIENNE**

*Of course, Jaime had a spare ship. What great lord doesn’t?*

Jaime had insisted she borrow it - a whole ship! - to travel to Kings Landing. That meant that what should have been a long, overland ride was instead a short journey to Lannisport, and then a sea voyage around the coast.

Granted, the downside to the sea route was that they would pass Tarth. While she longed to see her homeland again, staring at it from a distance was not what she had in mind, and she feared that just glimpsing the green hills and blue waters would stir up all the feelings of guilt and homesickness she was trying to repress. Still, with good winds, the ship would save weeks, and in any case she was tired of being on horseback.

Lannisport was the largest city Brienne had been in after Kings Landing. It was beautiful to look upon, its well-maintained walls dotted with elegant, round towers made from a stunning, white-grey rock and its skyline decorated with domes. The buildings were stone and plaster, with wood trim and red and golden-tiled roofs, and the wide streets were lined with small stores, many selling gold and jewellery and metalwork. The streets bustled with merchants and milkmaids and sailors and smallfolk of all types. It smelled earthy and enterprising, a contrast to the sickly-sweet of Kings Landing.

The people, the port, the city, it would all be her responsibility soon. She tried not to dwell on that.

She was escorted from the gates to the docks by a tall, slender man with straight blonde hair that fell past his shoulders. He introduced himself as “Taman Lannister, of the Lannisport Lannisters”.
She could only assume that being a Lannisport Lannister was a point of difference from the Casterly Rock variety, but it all seemed somewhat ridiculous.

Taman led their small party to an impressive looking cog, wide-bodied and gleaming, with a massive forecastle and a roaring lion figurehead that screamed “Lannister!” Brienne wasn’t sure that announcing their house affiliation so openly was particularly wise, especially as they had to circumvent Dorne, but she couldn’t be bothered arguing and was hardly in a position to demand another ship.

She was assigned the largest of the cabins, but it was still small and cramped, particularly for her height and bulk. She spent the majority of her first few days on the deck, admiring the view of the coastline while Garret and Daven vomited over the gunwhale.

Fortunately, they adjusted, and they moved onto other concerns by the time they sailed by the towers of Sunspear.


“Thinking of a new position, Daven?” Brienne asked, as she approached.

She was getting better at this banter, although perhaps it was just because she was more comfortable with these two men than she had been with anyone, except Pod and Sansa and Jaime.

Daven didn’t even blink. “Is one going? On me back in a Sunspear brothel would likely be more interesting that guarding this King Bran.”

“At least his Grace doesn’t punish underperformance by killing you in your sleep.”

“If it was a sandsnake doin’ me, I’d die happy.”

She doubted it. The sand snakes were not gentle. Jaime blamed them for poor Myrcella’s death, and by the sound of it that poison was not a way to die happy. But that was not her story to tell.

Grey Worm's men had reportedly found Ellaria Sand’s mangled body beneath the Red Keep, emancipated and showing all the signs of term torture. A pile of bones, dressed in the remains of Dornish dress, had been found nearby. Whether or not Ellaria deserved a black cell, the fate that had ultimately befallen her daughter and her had given new meaning to twisted. Brienne genuinely feared revenge.

“Talk your prowess up all you like, but keep an eye out. Lannisters are not popular here, and with this vessel we are as good as taunting them.”

Still, they passed Dorne with little trouble beyond the odd menacing ship on the horizon.

As they approached Tarth, Brienne felt the nerves start in her stomach, and the longing for home take root in her mind. However, as the island became visible on the horizon, a storm set in, and she was forced to sit out the passage in her cabin as the thunder rolled across the ocean. Alone, she leaned her head against a pillar and imagined her father staring out across the ocean, watching the same flashes of lightning. Was he with his new wife? She wondered what she would do if her father did not sire a son. She supposed she would have to be an absent lord, ruling from Casterly Rock. The idea held little appeal, but leaving Jaime held less still. And he is bound to the Rock, by order of the King. Probably by some sentimentality too, although he’d never admit it.

At Kings Landing, the ship came to rest at the newly restored docks. Davos had done an admirable
job overseeing repairs, and she could see labourers busily building a couple more piers. The city, too, looked incredible, the Red Keep almost living up to its name again, with the blackened soot having been cleaned from its walls so that the russet stone was visible.

As she made her way down the gangplank, she saw Tyrion standing on the dock, waiting, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Lord Commander,” he smiled broadly, offering a slight bow.

She returned it. “It is good to see you, Lord Lannister.”

“The other Lord Lannister,” he cracked a lopsided smile.

Tyrion looked good, Brienne decided, and painfully like his brother these days. The scar on his face was hidden by his well-trimmed beard, his hair was neatly combed and cut similarly to Jaime’s, and he too was going a little grey around the edges. Their stature, of course, was vastly different, but she’d almost stopped noticing how short Tyrion was. He filled the spaces he occupied despite his lack of height.

She scanned the docks.

“Where is Ser Podrick?” she asked, slightly hurt that he wasn’t here to greet her.

“Pod is guarding our king. Would you believe that he actually takes his duties seriously? Serving you ruined him.”

Brienne felt a rush of pride, then took her place beside Tyrion. They fell into a comfortable companionship as they made their way slowly up to the Keep. He filled her in on the latest developments, even some of the gossip. Rationing, logistics, rosters, some problems with bandits that Bran helped root out. The latest marriage alliances and high born births. She strained to put faces to most of the names. Court politics was never of much interest to her, and she rarely attended the feasts or parties.

But then, neither does Jaime. We are going to be very boring and reclusive lords.

“The courts are running smoothly, too,” Tyrion continued. “Fewer disputes over what happened. Litigants are all terrified his Grace will revisit events and they’ll be hung for perjury. Still too many lawyers, but they’re engaging in endless arguments about interpretation of the law rather than what happened. Brain-numbing as best.”

“Jaime doesn’t have the benefit of omniscience in Casterly Rock. We will have to decide disputes the traditional way.”

Tyrion snorted. “Dunking chairs, red-hot iron bars and boiling water? Or a Clegane with an axe?”

She thought of Jaime and his commitment to try to be fairer. “Not anymore. Courts and trials, where possible. No doubt he’ll still just hang outlaws though.”

As they made their way up the long, winding staircase to the Red Keep, Tyrion grew quieter. Brienne could tell something was bothering him, but she didn’t press. She waited until finally Tyrion offered her his thoughts.

“Queen Sansa will be here shortly.”

Brienne felt a wave of both delight and surprise, mixed with a little concern. “Truly? I thought she
never wanted to come south again?”

“She didn’t. Warmth and comfort do not agree with her. But she has ‘pressing matters’ to attend to.” Brienne could hear the bitterness in his voice as he continued. “I believe she comes to settle her affairs. With me.”

“Oh,” Brienne glanced down at her soon-to-be good brother. ‘Oh’ seemed rather inadequate, all things considered. She wondered why he was talking to her about this. Perhaps, as with so many things, he saw her as a substitute for Jaime. But I am not. I am so very bad at this

“She likely wishes a formal annulment. Presumably to eliminate any doubt about the legitimacy of her future children.”

“Oh,” Brienne said again, helplessly.

“She tells me that she does not wish to remarry, but she has little option,” Tyrion continued. “The Northern Lords require an heir.”

Of course they do. Birthing offspring was one obligation all lords, male or female, were expected to fulfil in the name of family and stability and serving the realm. Although the ladies bear the heavier part of the burden.

Brienne thought again of Tarth, and her father, but pushed away the guilt. Sansa’s dilemma was much worse that hers. Sansa had good reason to dread another marriage. Still, whatever her feelings, the Queen of the North would do her duty, and she would put that duty above her own happiness, and likely above anyone else’s too. After all, look what she did to me, the petty part of Brienne thought. She wasn’t angry, but she still sad, and a little hurt.

She swallowed. “No doubt you can help provide an heir.”

Tyrion raised an eyebrow. “This is a surprisingly frank conversation I am having with you, my Lady Sister,” he snorted. “But, no, I can’t. The north will never accept an heir that is part Lannister, and particularly part imp. That is a fact that is not up for debate.”

As it would not accept a southron Lord Commander.

Brienne had long wondered if Tyrion’s feelings for Sansa were more than friendly, and this conversation confirmed that they certainly were. She could think of no solution, just as she could not fault Sansa’s reasons. The north remembers every slight, even as it overlooks the favours. And Sansa, for good or ill, was a woman of the north.

“She does not need to have children,” Brienne said carefully. “Arya will be back, eventually. She’ll marry Gendry and they’ll have children.”

Tyrion kicked at a loose stone on the step. “Perhaps. But they will not be Starks.”

“Nor, necessarily, will Sansa’s.”

They fell silent for a moment, other than the sound of their feet on the steps.

“I suppose I could offer to take her name,” Tyrion pondered. “Although that doesn’t solve the imp problem.” He sighed heavily, and then looked up at her. “I assume you’ve come to make arrangements to ensure my brother holds up the Lannister side of things?”

Brienne felt her cheeks redden again, and she looked back at her feet. “Well, yes.”
Tyrion’s glanced at her curiously.

“You do want children?” he asked her, cautiously.

It was not, she supposed, something a lord would not usually need to ask a lady. For most women, the answer would be so obvious there need not even be a question. But she was not most women.

“I want children,” Brienne answered honestly. *I dallied with Jaime for a month and did not get pregnant. We were far from careful. “If I can. Most women my age have children, if not grandchildren.”*

*Why am I telling Tyrion this?*

“You are not so old.”

“I am not so young, either. I will be fortunate if I birth one or two healthy children. The risks increase with age.”

“Then you better get going. I am sure my brother will be happy to assist.”

Yes. *Well.* The memory of Jaime assisting was certainly a pleasant one, and she did want to get back to that. But there was that one problem … and she supposed, given she was being unusually open, Tyrion was as good a person as any to discuss it with. He would be more pragmatic than Jaime, and more likely to understand.

“I am the first woman to be appointed Lord Commander. I cannot resign the position within a year.”

There, she’d voiced her fear. To Tyrion, of all people. *Pride* was holding her back. Pride and guilt.

“Can you not?” Tyrion asked. “The rules are different now. You have been successful in the role. You have brought honour to yourself and your men. Your king is alive, which is no mean feat these days. You can fill your page in the White Book. You, my Lady, are entitled to retire.”

She frowned. “It does not set a good precedent.”

“Who cares?”

She fixed him with a hard look. “Everyone.”

Tyrion merely rolled his eyes. “My father was wrong about a great many things, but he used to say that a lion does not care for the opinion of the sheep. I know that’s hardly inspirational, coming from him, but there is truth in it.

“You’re about to become a lion. Don’t worry about what people think. Do what makes you happy, Brienne. You deserve it.”

**JAIME**

“I’ve never seen the like, Jaime. Dead everywhere. *Badly* dead, if you get my meanin’. And … with stuff in their mouths.”

Strongboar looked disturbingly shaken, more so than Jaime had ever seen him, as he relayed the
story of his journey to Deep Den. The surrounding countryside had been devastated, hamlets and villages burned. The bombastic knight was not given to weakness or fear, which made his unease especially disconcerting.

“‘Stuff?’ Jaime asked. Do I really even want to know?

“Coins. And dead animals.”

Dead animals? Jaime frowned. What the bloody hell are these bandits about?

“Who were these dead men?”

“Former Lannister soldiers, mainly, and their families. Children too. All hung, coins in the mouths. My men and I, Lord Lydden’s men too, scoured the area, but we found nothing. Spoke to the smallfolk in other places abouts, but none of them have seen anything either. Off course. Whole towns must be full of folks who are painfully short sighted. Lucky, those smallfolk who survived and wanted our help to get out had the sense to talk. They said the outlaws called themselves the ‘Brotherhood’.”

Jaime jerked a little at that. The Brotherhood? “The brotherhood without banners?”

“That’s it. You know them?”

“Maybe.”

Hadn’t what little was left of them died in the north, with Dondarrion? Perhaps not all of them? Perhaps he left them?

“The Brotherhood were outlaws operating in the Riverlands during the war. At the start they harassed our men, and the Freys, but they got less discerning as the war went on, and soon even the smallfolk were complaining about them. Most were former Stark men, but they accumulated others as they went. Even Sandor Clegane, for a while, if rumour is correct. Dondarrion and that mad priest from Myr were said to be the leaders, and things really went to shit after they headed north. Still, even at their worst, the brotherhood were never known to hang children.”

Strongboar grimaced. “Still, I’m bettin' that’s them. What are they doing here?”

Jaime puzzled over that. “I don’t know. They may blame the Westerlands for the chaos in the Riverlands and be seeking some kind for revenge. Burning farms, livestock and grain stores when we’re on the brink of famine is just bloody stupid.”

“Unless they think we are only going to use our food to feed our own?”

Which we are, Jaime conceded to himself. As he did so, a little of that annoying regret weedled its way into his thoughts. Westermen had helped start this war and maintain it, and yet the Westerlands was in a better position that the Riverlands and most everywhere else.

He shook her head to try to clear the guilt. Be that as it may, we do not have enough to give aid and my people are my priority.

Then another thought came, unbidden, to his mind. Perhaps they are just out to punish me? “There’s a bounty on your head.” He remembered the guard from Maidenpool telling him that. But that was hundreds of miles away, and he was almost sure that had something to do with Ned Stark’s self-induced execution. Who would care about such things here?
Jaime felt his missing fingers clench. *A missing hand, a missing sword. Missing pieces of this puzzle*. The temptation to get on his horse and go hunt the bastards down was high, but his chances of being able to hold his own were minimal, and he had too many other duties to attend to besides. He would need to rely on Crakehall and the others. He felt bloody useless.

*The Brotherhood*. He knew of only one surviving member, and even his association with the band was tenuous. Still, it was worth a try.

“I’ll send word to someone who may be able to enlighten us. In the meantime, take who you need, scour those hills, and see what you can flush out. If you find anyone alive, bring them to me. We need answers, not corpses.”

Strongboar rolled his eyes. “Capture the bastards alive? That’s no fun…”

But he did as he was bidden, taking three hundred men. *Too many, the people will be scared.* But he didn’t intervene. Crakehall has been scared too.

Later, Jaime stood on the battlements and watched them leave, the feeling of unease rising in his chest. There was something bubbling under the surface, he could sense it. Something wrong and foreboding. He wanted Brienne. He could talk to her, and not feel like an idiot. Until she told him he was acting like one. Then they could argue and that might get her in the mood for another form of tussling and … he cursed and shut that thought down. *No use going there, she’ll be gone for months.*

Frustrated, he wandered back to his study, pondering again how he had ended up in this position. Lord of Casterly Rock. The one thing he’d been running away from his entire life. *At least since Cersei came to me in that inn...* He cut that thought off immediately, too, as he did most thoughts about his sister these days.

He sat down behind his desk and began to work through the missives and notes. Despite his father’s efforts to teach him to read, he still found reading a challenge. His struggle to master it had made him feel like an idiot as a kid, and was still a source of some shame. He’d never even told Cersei, lying to her and saying he just found books boring or that he liked pissing off their measter.

*And yet I confessed it to Brienne.*

He’d told her back in Kings Landing, when she’d tried to hand him a letter from her father and announced it contained a message for him.

"Here,” she’d said, handing him the letter. He’s sent you a message. Read it."

"I hate reading."

“Oh come on. It’s three sentences. It won’t offend your manly pride. You’ll read it by looking at it ..".

Of course, she was right, but he must have looked uncertain, because her eyes had gone wide.

“You can read?” she’d asked incredulously.

“Of course I can read! Bloody hell …” He’d grabbed the scroll from her, looked at it, and then, for some inexplicable reason, he’d spilled his guts to her. Again.

“Sometimes the letters move.”
“Letters don't move. They are ink on a page.”

“Everyone keeps saying that, and yet they do not stay in one place!”

She’d scoffed, and he’d tried to explain, and it had ended up becoming another one of those confessions he seemed to offer her all the bloody time. He’d told her how Cersei picked it up reading with the same ease he had a sword, while he’d spent four hours a day locked in a room trying to master it as the letters danced before his eyes and he wondered what the fuck was wrong with him. She’d listened with that stoic, blank look of hers. Then she had read the three lines to him. After that they had walked back up to the Keep, with him teasing her about how father was clearly planning their betrothal.

They had never talked about either the reading, or the supposed betrothal, again.

He turned back to the page in front of him. A summary of the month’s manorial court outcomes. Bloody hell, legal cases. About fines and accounts. He started flicking through them. His day couldn’t get much worse.

“Here you are!”

A voice broke his concentration. Jaime looked up to see his Aunt Genna standing in the doorway, her hands on her broad hips.

The daylight suited her. Despite being close to sixty, she still had smooth skin and most of her teeth. She’d piled her greying-gold hair on top of her head today, giving her near another foot of height and a slightly rectangular appearance rather than her usual square.

He stood in greeting. “My lady.”

She’d clearly grown more comfortable in the castle these last few weeks. She was dressed in a tightly fitting dress that left most of her ample bosom on full display. It was bordering on indecent, but it would take a braver man than Jaime Lannister to make an issue of it.

She grinned at him. “You looked very much like your father just now.”

“There’s a terrifying thought.”

“No, a reassuring one.”

Was it? She had told him once that Tyrion was Tywin’s son, not him, and he had never quite gotten over it, even though deep down he agreed.

He pushed the chair back and made his way around the table to be nearer to her. He could feel her eyes appraising him. Always appraising, weighing. He wondered what she really thought of him now. A better man than his father, if their earlier conversation was anything to go by, but probably also greying, maimed, and weak.

“How can I be of assistance?”

“Sweetling, it is how I may be of assistance to you. You and your terrifying bride.”

Her tone was light, and Jaime couldn’t hear even an undercurrent of disapproval. She is likely as horrified as father would have been, but she hides it well.

“We still have many arrangements to make if this near-ruin is to host a proper Lannister wedding,
and while I have already done the vast majority of the work, I do think it is appropriate I at least consult with one of those to be wed. It happens, my dear, that you are both the most convenient and, I think, the one more likely to care.”

Jaime smiled at that. She was probably right. He beckoned to a chair. She sat in it, and spread various scrolls and papers on the table in front of her. It was like she was laying down a battle plan. She’s done that enough to know how.

“First, here’s her father’s long awaited consent. Selwyn Tarth sounds just as charming as his daughter.” She passed a scroll across the table.

“You read it?” He was somewhat horrified.

“Sweety, it came here via Storms End and the Citadel. Half of Westeros has read it. Not much need for Ravens between Tarth and Casterly Rock it would seem.”

Jaime scrowled, and unfurled the scroll. He concentrated carefully on the small, neat words.

________

Lord Lannister,

My daughter is her own woman and always has been. She has made many decisions I do not understand, this among them. However, if she wishes to marry you, I will not stand in her way. I ask only that she treat her well, and should Tarth one day fall under your authority, that you treat her people with similar respect.

Ser Selwyn Tarth

Jaime snorted. “My reputation precedes me. What else do you have?”

She handed him a ledger book. “Accounts. Your father was meticulously organised, down to the last groat, but unfortunately, his successors and agents were less diligent. And as for Cersei...well.” She frowned, shaking her head in apparent disgust. “With her, anything and everything went. Now, I’ve prepared correspondence to the citadel, requesting the assistance of a maester with a link in accountancy, but in the meantime, I have prepared something of a budget…”

She leaned over and pointed to some numbers at the base of the ledger. “I’ve taken account of your would-be wife’s frugal tastes and the current shortages but we can still have something of a celebration.”

Jaime squinted at the document.”How did you do all this?

She snorted. “You think Emmon, or any of those wretched Freys, other than Lord Walder of course, kept tabs on their own money? I had to learn to do it, particularly if I wanted to purchase halfway decent plonk. Now, with that in mind, we have the next issue…”

He raised an eyebrow, and she took out another, thicker wad of paper. “The guest list.”

“The fewer, the better. Brienne will agree.”

But Genna shook her head. “You’re a Lord, and this is a wedding, and unless you want to start
another inter-family war, you’ll have to get this just right. It won’t be small.”

He groaned at the size of the list.

Suddenly that dispute over the right to sell cabbages to the cook at Ashmark didn’t look quite so boring.

**BRIENNE**

“Ser...My Lady!”

Pod jumped to his feet to welcome her, as she made her way into the Lord Commander’s chambers.

Brienne thought he looked rather dashing, standing behind the large desk in his white cloak and polished plate. *He has grown into a handsome man. A good man too. He would make some girl a fine husband one day, if she could keep him clear of drink and brothels.*

They stood comfortably for a moment, formal and stiff, but then Podrick shrugged, said “bugger it”, and then moved around the desk to hug her. After a moment of shocked stiffness, she clasped him back. They were in private, so what did it matter?

He pulled back, and looked at her with wide, slightly concerned eyes.

“I heard the news. You are marry Ser Jaime,” he paused. “Congratulations.”

In truth, the line sounded like someone was pulling it out of him like a rotting tooth, and the rising inflection as the end put it somewhere between a question and a demand for an explanation.

Well, she wasn’t about to give one. Not again.

“Oh come on, Pod. Don’t start. I’m going to hear it from Sansa too.”

He raised his hands. “I didn’t say anything, ser. Your choice. I just…” he looked down at the table, apparently suddenly fascinated by it. “I know what he did to you.”

Brienne kept her tone neutral but firm. “It was more complicated than you know.” *It is also none of your business, Pod, please leave this alone.*

“Yeah? Well, whatever. He doesn’t deserve you.” He paused before he added. “Noone does, ser.”

A lump formed in her throat. “Thank you, Pod.”

Partially to hide her watery eyes, she moved away from him and wandered back behind the desk, running her fingers over the grains in the wood. She had wanted this, once. Still did really. The honour of it, the duty and responsibility. Her heart was heavy at the thought of resigning. *But there are other ways to serve. I will find them.*

“Are you happy, Pod?” she heard herself ask him.

He looked at her in surprise, then leaned over a chair and considered.
“Yes, ser. Happy enough. It’s a little boring, but boredom is much better than constantly being in mortal peril, which was more or less usual when squiring for you and Tyrion.”

Brienne nodded.

“And I think back, you know, to when I was nearly hung over that ham ... and well, who’d have imagined me here? After that? Certainly not me. I owe that to you.”

“Thank you Pod. Although don’t discount your own hard work.”

“I never do,” he smiled at her.

She closed her eyes and wondered how to broach what she had to say next. It was the kind of talk a son would usually expect from a father, but he didn’t have one of those. He would make do with her.

“When it comes time to marry, if you wish, I am sure we can make arrangements for you,” she began. “Ser Jaime needs loyal men, landed knights. We can find you lands in the Westerlands, maybe near your family, where you can raise your sons. A wife too, if you have need of one.”

Pod’s eyes widened, and for a moment he looked like a deer trapped by dogs. “Um…”

She looked like he wanted to bolt. It was actually kind of amusing.

“No pressure. Of course,” she added, to his visible relief. “You are young.”

She had given the issue some thought, and was intending to propose to Jaime that Pod be given Clegane Keep, the Clegane’s being extinct in the male and female lines. But she was yet to raise that with Jaime, and she meant it when she said she didn’t want to pressure on a Pod.

“Thank you,” he said, visibly relieved. “But yes, if I … “ he was red now, and flustered. “If I wish to marry, I would appreciate that.”

“In the meantime, I would appreciate it if you came to Casterly Rock for the wedding. I don’t have much in the way of family, and I would like all of it there. Whatever you think of my soon to be husband.”

He flushed with pleasure, and a little embarrassment. “Of course, ser! Wouldn’t miss it! Despite your choice of husband.”

“Good. I’ll seek your leave from King Brandon.”

She summoned a squire to help her into the kingsguard armour, and then she and Pod spent some time catching up. She found herself feeling proud of just about everything he did, which, she thought, was somewhat pathetic. He was on duty early the next day, so wandered off to get supper and an early night. I had to boot him in the ribs to get him up before daybreak when he traveled with me, but maybe he’s maturing. She then spent some more time putting her affairs in order, as well as those of the Lord Commander.

As night fell, she received the summons she had been waiting for, to attend upon King Brandon.

She met Tyrion and Davos outside of the throne room.

Davos smiled at her indulgently. “I hear you worked things out,” he said, bouncing slightly, hands behind his back.
How does this news travel so fast?

“Some things,” she said cautiously. “But now I have other problems.” She nodded at the door.

“I don’t think it’ll be a problem.” Tyrion assured her.

She steeled herself anyway, and followed him through the doors.

Their small party made it way into the throne room. Bran occupied his usual position on the raised dias, waiting for them. He would have been tall and gangly, she supposed, had he stood, but he always looked small and frail in that chair. The knowledge that Jaime did that to him was never going to be something she could forget, even if Bran had apparently forgiven him. She wasn’t sure if could have done that. She knew couldn’t have forgiven him if it had been Pod. And yet I love him anyway. And I know he is a good man. I just wish he could see it.

King Brandon interrupted her thoughts. He did not waste any time with the formalities.

“Lord Commander. You have come to request release from the kingsguard.”

His voice was neutral, calm, as it always was. If anything, he sounded bored. He looked bored too, sitting in his wheeled chair, in the darkened room, gazing listlessly into … well, whatever it was he gazed into when he went vacant eyed and distant like that. We need to get the stained glass windows replaced, so at least he’ll appear to be looking into them.

Brienne inclined head. “Yes, your Grace.”

There, she had said it, and it was not as hard as she had thought it would be. She’d swallowed her pride, her honour, and resigned. The things we do for love.

“The things we do for love.” Bran said, echoing her thoughts.

Brienne flushed and Tyrion snorted and Davos looked uncomfortable.

But Bran barely missed a beat. “Very well, you will be released.”

She blinked. That seemed too easy. She felt rather numb. A small, insecure part of her wondered whether it was too easy, and he had wanted to be rid of her. Stop thinking that, she told herself harshly.

“All right,” she said softly, to herself, after a moment. “Thank you, your Grace.”

She felt slightly dizzy again. She was reminded how she felt when she had been freed from her vow to Sansa, her obligation to Tarth, her relationship with Jaime. But this felt different. Calmer. More certain. I have somewhere to go this time.

“I will accept the sword of Ser Daven, in your place, if that is what he desires,” Bran continued. “I believe it is,” Brienne said.

Tyrion was more upfront. “He is accepting primarily to escape his wife, but he would not be the first Lannister to join the kingsguard with that motivation. And he is, your Grace, a talented soldier, albeit one better used to put down rebellions than guard the small council.”

Bran seemed unconcerned. “He will do well enough, for a time.”

“Right, well that was easy,” Tyrion said brightly. “Wine?”
He started to make his way over to a cabinet, when Brienne said cautiously, ‘‘Will be’. You said I ‘will be’ released. Does that mean not now?’’

She was not sure how she felt about that. Frustration, but maybe also a little hope, an excuse to cling to the present.

“I accept your immediate resignation as Lord Commander, Ser Brienne...’’ Bran’s said, evenly, letting the new, or old, title fall on her shoulders.

Ser. I’m a Ser again. Brienne did feel a certain sadness at that. She had met Jaime again as an equal, a Lord, but now he was again her superior. And he always will be. Her status as a lady would never be equal to his as lord. That would take getting used to.

“...but I would request one service, before I release you entirely.”

Beside her, Tyrion stiffened, but Brienne remained impassive. “Of course, your Grace.”

“I understand you also seek my advice about what Lord Jaime fought, in the bowels of Casterly Rock?”

Tyrion and Dvaos both shot her a quizzical look. Of course. She had forgotten. But Bran remembered, as he always did. That was something she was never going to get used to.

“I have looked for this man, or this creature.” Bran’s voice was neutral, calm. “Yet I cannot see it.”

Tyrion looked skeptical. “If my brother says he fought creature, I am sure he is telling you …”

“Yes,” said Bran, calmly. “No. I don’t doubt that he relays what he believes to be the truth. But I cannot see the battle, or the creature, and the memory itself is strange, as if I am looking through water, or thick glass.”

Brienne tried to repress a shudder. “What does that mean?”

Bran’s voice was cold. “I don’t know. It may suggest magic of some kind at work, or it may suggest limitations to my own powers of sight, of which I was previously unaware.”

Davos frowned. “What kind of magic?”

Brienne shot him a quick, sympathetic look. Davos was as uncomfortable with any kind of magic as she. She thought again of the shadow. Another thing I will never forget.

Tyrion, however, was more accepting. “Is it a threat?”

“I don’t know,” Bran admitted. “But I do wish to find out. Indeed, we must. Ser Brienne, there are villages near Deep Den that have recently been put to the torch. I have reason to believe they are connected to your intruder, because I cannot see the event, only the aftermath. Lord Jaime has sent men, but while he means well, I fear they are the wrong men.

Accordingly, Ser Brienne, I ask this one final duty of you. Take Ser Podrick and a dozen trusted men and return to Casterly Rock by the Goldroad and Deep Den. Speak to the people in the surrounding area, and see what you can discover about the cause of this trouble.”

“Only a dozen?” Davos asked sceptically.

“I do not believe this is a situation that can be properly resolved by an army. Too many swords,
and the smallfolk will frighten. It is best if we can find out what is going on more subtly. In the meantime, we must be cautious. Something is stirring. I can feel it.”

Brienne nodded. “Very well, your Grace.”

“Hand, please help Ser Brienne make the necessary arrangements.”

”Of course, your Grace,” Tyrion replied.

”I’m almost afraid to ask,” Davos said, “but what am I doing here?”

”Ah yes, my master of ships,” Bran answered, and Brienne thought he might have, just might have, cracked a smile. “I have a guest list for an upcoming wedding, at Casterly Rock. I’m hoping you can assist with organising the transportation. It’s going to be quite a project.”

Brienne felt her stomach sink. Just how many people was Genna inviting? She passingly wondered, almost hopefully, whether the affairs at Deep Den could possibly be complicated enough to give her an excuse to miss her own wedding.

Chapter End Notes

The discussion about reading may have been a little self-indulgent. I have a (thankfully relatively mild) form of dyslexia and I struggled with writing, reading aloud, and 'silly' mistakes in spelling and math, especially, as a kid. P, b, g and d were the absolute bane of my existence, and I can barely articulate how greatly spellcheck and the ability to save telephone numbers improved my life (although I still miss typos, even when I read 3 or 4 times, and I regularly input telephone numbers in wrong when saving them!). I was a stubborn kid who worked at it myself. But I feel ShowJaime's pain! (There is so indication that BookJaime has any such issues, but BookJaime is such a different character I’ve given up reconciling them).
Entombed

Chapter Notes

A shorter chapter this time...see notes below re certain similarities with AFFC.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

BRIENNE

She was dreaming. A horrible, evil dream.

She was a prisoner again, tied to a stake in a grey room in Harrenhal, with Locke breathing down her neck, his putrid breath burning her nostrils and making her stomach broil.

She was on the forest floor, the smell of mould and rot about her, as mens’ hands clawed at her clothing. Jaime was yelling “Sapphires!”

“Jaime,” she heard herself scream. “Jaime!”

She was standing in the courtyard at Winterfell as Jaime galloped anyway, his horse’s hooves kicking up the sludge on the ground. She was covered in snow, all in white, except for red blood on her hands and on the ground between her legs.

Then the snow became ice, pale and blue, and then dark, like the waters of Tarth.

The ocean, she was in the ocean, staring up at Evenfall Hall. Her father was there, but she couldn't see him. Couldn't remember his face.

The sea rose up to claim her, and she was falling, and drowning, unable to breath.

She let the water take her …

Brienne opened her eyes, and the dream gave way to an equally horrifying reality. She was slung across the rump a horse, face down like a sack of oats, her arm and face a mass of agony.

I am a prisoner again.

Her nose was buried in the shaggy coat of her horse. The beast’s haunches clenched and bunched under her, the movement causing the rough fur to abrade the skin on her nose, and each breath she took delivered a noseful of the bitter smell of sweat and vomit. She forced her eyes open, and fought to focus her bleary vision. She could see little but the horses’ filthy coat and the rough ground beneath. At some stage, she’d been sick, emptying up her meager breakfast over the beast’s flanks. She felt an urge to retch again at the sight. Unwillingly she moaned, but her throat was as dry as the deserts of Dorne, and the attempt made her cough.

Memories of the last time she was tied to a horse flooded back. The men and their hands, the way they pawed at her. The sound of the blade on Jaime’s bones. She couldn’t breathe. She tried to turn her head to gasp fresh air, but the motion made her vision blur and blacken.
The world swam and she fell back into a blessed unconsciousness.

She awoke again. Whether minutes or hours had passed she was not sure, although she could see a deeper shadow beside her horse. Her back was in agony, as was her head.

She remembered, a prisoner, and panic seized her. She forced herself to breathe deeply, calmly, control her fear.

*These are not the Bolton men. Not the bloody mummers. What were they? Outlaws? Bandits? Or something worse?*

She tried to get her bearings, to remember.

A battle, yes. They had been fighting and she has lost. Hurt, and badly. The nausea hit her again.

Unbidden, she moaned again. The sound was foreign to her ears. *Gods, was that me?*

“Ser, my lady, Brienne!”

*Pod. Thank the Mother.*

She tried to look for him, then to speak, to assure him she was alright, but her voice failed her.

“Where…” She managed, when she tried again. She was barely audible, her voice was ragged, torn. She felt her lips crack when she moved them and she tasted metallic blood on her tongue.

“I don’t know, we were captured - “ he began.

“-silence!” came a voice from nearby, a little behind.

Brienne tried again to turn her head, to see Pod, make sure we was alright, but her stiff neck would not cooperate. She glimpsed movement, light, a little to one side. Golden hills and a golden cliff face. *The Westerlands. Lannister lands.* That at least was a relief.

She closed her eyes again and tried very hard to remember how she had gotten in this situation.

They had set out from Kings Landing some weeks ago, with Pod, two dozen men, and instructions to survey an area of the Westerlands that Bran was uneasy about. It had been an uneventful trip, until they reached a village just outside of Deep Den.

Uneventful, except that she’d started vomiting, grown weak and nearly fallen from her horse.

*I was sick. We stayed at the inn,* she remembered.

There had been only four rooms, and no space for all of her men. She would not usually agree to stay at an inn, and certainly not when her men were with her, but she’d been so ill and tired, and in need of a wash, that Pod and her captain had insisted on a night of bedrest.

“You can always set to cantering up on the morrow,” Captain Alyn Storm, had assured her.

“Try and get the gossip too,” Garret had, typically, advised. They’d failed at that for days, villagers reluctant to talk to soldiers, even though they were clearly terrified of something that Brienne’s people might actually be able to protect them from. “Pod, anyway, should talk to them, if not you. People talk to him.”

She's acceded to the suggestion. It had been weak and foolish, but she’d felt so out of sorts she couldn’t even be bothered to argue. She'd stopped, with Pod and five men who were also
somewhat worse for wear from age or impairment.

*Just an inn.* An acorn on the door. She couldn’t remember its name. Only that the patrons had been surly and food had been dreadful. Behind the bar there had been a girl, a slender girl with dark hair and large eyes and a northern accent. A northern girl in a Westerlands Inn. *Had that not been unusual?* She had not thought so at the time. So many people had been displaced she had paid it no mind.

Then the attack had happened. Outlaws. Two dozen of them. They had galloped in, bold as they pleased, hoods up and faces hidden, calling for "the lions". Her and Pod and their men had gone to meet them, but there had been so many. *Too many.* Then more had come out from inside the inn, and she knew they had been caught. *No chance and no choice.*

But there had been a choice, hadn't there? To flee. When the armed men came from inside the inn, she’d known she’d made the wrong one. *Still too trusting, too naive.* Had it been a trap all along?

*What had happened to the others?* She tried to think. Pod, yes, Pod was still with her. He’d called to her earlier. The others? She didn’t know. One man had died before her eyes, a spear to the belly, and another fell to a hammer. A third was trampled by a horse, but the beast had balked at her size and blade. The rest was unknown. Her head hurt. She thought of the men who had fallen. *Why can I not remember their names?* She had to remember...

*I killed two outlaws with Oathkeeper,* she recalled instead, *but I fell to a third.* *No, I slipped in the mud and then he was on me.* A huge beast with sharpened teeth. Mad eyes. He’d *bitten* her cheek. She’d slain him too, knocked out his teeth with a mailed fist first. Then another had broken her arm with his hammer.

As if reminded, the pain in her cheek and then her arm came galloping back, along with a flood of agony in other parts. It was unbearable. This time the blackness that claimed her wasn’t the waters of Tarth, but a vicious, wide-mouthed beast. It came to swallow her whole. She let it.

When she awoke the third time, she was flat on her back on a thick blanket on a cold, hard floor. No longer on the horse, no longer in the hills. She was surrounded instead by walls. Not carved, but rough, the light from a handful of candles casting soft patterns on the crevices and pits. The roof was low above her. *A cave,* she realised. *No, not a cave, a mine.*

Still in Lannister lands, then. *That,* at least, was still a relief.

*Jaime will not be far.*

*But perhaps that is not such a good thing.* *Lions they were after, and Jaime was their King.*

Her head still hurt, as did her cheek and her arm. She felt sick again. She rolled over to wretch, but her stomach was empty.

Pod was beside her immediately.

“Drink,” he instructed.

She blinked at him in the dim light of a candle. He held a flask to her lips, and she swallowed the liquid down. Her throat was raw, but the tepid, muddy water tasted as sweet as honeyed wine.

When her eyes adjusted to the dimness she looked around. Pod’s broad face loomed above her. He had two blackened eyes and a large gash above one lip, but otherwise did not look to be in bad shape.
“Pod, where are we?”

“I don’t know, exactly,” he whispered, beckoning to her to keep her voice down. “We were captured, by outlaws of some kind. You were holding them off, one against many, but you were knocked unconscious. They made me put you on the horse and we rode for sometime. Then you were unwell, with a fever, and I think your cheek was infected. They treated it...a girl did.”

She reached up to touch her cheek. “They are honourable then?”

He shrugged. “They haven’t tried to kill us, not yet. And they haven’t been cruel, not really, but they are not exactly welcoming either. I suspect it is less that they are honourable than that they know you are valuable.”

“Alright. Good.” It could be worse. She thought again of Harrenhal and shuddered. “What do they want?”

Pod shook his head. “I don’t know. They haven’t asked any questions. They knew who we were so maybe they didn’t need to.”

They knew who we were. A surprise attack. Are we hostages? For Jaime? For the king, or someone else? Surely Bran would know. But then she remembered. His grace could not see this. She wondered where his sight had stopped. Perhaps the inn?

She hoped Pod was right, and that they were being held for ransom. The situation was embarrassing, but they would survive it. She wondered what the outlaws would demand for her release, and hoped it was not too much. Jaime will pay it, she didn't contemplate otherwise, but the burden would ultimately fall on the smallfolk.

Brienne shuddered. The cave was cold, and she had but a thin wrap to lie on. Someone had stripped her of her armour and she wore only a linen shift, while Pod was dressed in a ragged shirt and breeches. Both their feet were bare. We could not run far even if we were free, perhaps that is why we are not bound. She tried to sit up, but when she placed her hand on the ground, pain shot through her arm. That’s right. Broken. She tried to sit up again, more carefully this time, ready for the nausea too. Thankfully, it didn’t come.

She looked down at her bandages and the splint on her arm. At least it looked to be set properly. She raised her hand to her cheek to prod at the bandage on it. Pod frowned at the gesture.

“You were badly hurt.” He gave her a rueful smile. “I got knocked out earlier in the fighting. When I came to, they made me put you on the horse.”

“And the others?”

“I haven’t seen them. They weren’t with us when we left the inn. I think some might be dead.”

She nodded sadly, feeling a pang of guilt. They were the older men too, with families. I had thought I was doing them a favour.

A grinding noise pierced the chamber, and Brienne and a Pod turned to see the wooden panel that was being used as a door being pulled aside. Two men entered, a large, stocky one and a smaller one, both dark haired and grey eyed. The larger one had a broad, comely face that looked stern but not cruel; the smaller one had beady eyes filled with anger. This one is dangerous, she noted. She thought she may recognise him, but couldn't place it.

Brienne pushed herself to her feet to confront the men. She was taller than both, and perhaps better
built. Certainly better fed, notwithstanding the last few days of near starvation. She did her best to summon her Lord Commander imperiousness, even though she hardly felt worthy of the role, dressed in a shift and in her weakened state.

“I want my clothes and my sword,” she demanded.

The bigger man laughed. “And I want my bloody brother back, and the gold in Casterly Rock. but that’s not going to happen, is it?”

Brienne blinked at them, wondered if she had missed some crucial part of this conversation. “Who are you? Did I know your brother?”

The big man appraised her quickly, did the same to Pod where he stood next to her. He seemed to make a quick decision to answer.

“We were lords’ men once, and some king’s men too. But now we have neither lords nor kings. Now we are simply a Brotherhood.”

“The Brotherhood,” the other man said.

“The Brotherhood…” she whispered. She knew of the Brotherhood. “You were Dondarrion’s men. Sent to the Riverlands during the war.”

“Some of us. I originally belonged to another.”

_Eddard Stark by the accent_, she guessed.

“I served with the brothers, at Winterfell,” Brienne began. “Ser Beric…”

“Pfwat.” The small man spat. “Dondarrion sold us out. Joined up with the dragons and his oh-so-noble kin. Lined us up to be slaughtered in the dragon bitch’s cause.”

Brienne shook her head firmly. “No, he didn’t. He and his men fought _with_ the Starks, but _not for_ them. They fought for the living, against the dead. And they died doing so.”

The larger man look momentarily surprised, but the younger one looked only pleased.

“Good thing too,” he laughed. “Less leeches. Wolves, lions, dragons, they’re all fucking animals.”

“Dondarrion was a good man,” Brienne said resolutely. But they would not listen, and she lacked the strength to argue. “What do you want with us.”

“You are here to face judgement,” the big man said, not unkindly.

“For what?”

The little one grinned, all yellow teeth. “You are the kingslayer’s whore.”

She startled at that. She hadn’t heard that title - _Kingslayer’s whore_ - in quite some time, perhaps not since Winterfell. No one had used it within her hearing at Kings Landing while she was Lord Commander. Once she may have been shamed by it, but now she simply shrugged.

“I am betrothed to Jaime Lannister, yes.”

“And you share his bed.”
I suppose it is no secret now.

“I have, yes,” she said simply. “Most don’t approve but it is hardly a crime.”

Beside her, she could sense Pod’s muscles bunching, as if he were preparing to attack. She raised a hand to calm him.

“It’s a crime if the kings says it is, and right now we’re your king and we says it is,” said the shorter one.

His eyes were filled with contempt and loathing, but there was also something knowing in them. *This one will not be persuaded by words, and particularly not the words of a woman.*

“You lay with lions, you get fleas,” the bigger one, with a shrug that was almost apologetic.

*Its dogs, you idiot,* Brienne thought caustically, but now was not the time to develop a talent for Lannister quips. She needed to calm things down not escalate them.

“And Podrick? What did he do?” she asked.

“He was the imps’ squire. And yours. That makes him a loin too.”

“So what?” Pod asked. “I am not ashamed to be a westerman.” He stood straight and tall, not in the least cowed. *These are his lands, too,* she reminded herself. *Pod is more lion that I.*

“You should be ashamed. You need to face justice too,” the big one grunted.

“Bold words for those in the lion’s lands,” Pod observed. “You are very likely surrounded and outnumbered.”

“And yet they haven’t been able to find us.”

“They probably aren’t looking,” Pod scoffed. "Because scum like you is not worth their time..."

“Oh, I can assure we are - “

Brienne moved to stand in front of Pod. This was insane, but she wasn’t going to let Pod get himself killed trying to insult some sense into these men. *When had he developed such a smart mouth anyway?*

“I do not doubt that you are aggrieved. We all suffered during the Wars. But it is over. Go back to your wives and your crops.”

The short one leered. “Got nothin’ to return to. Lions ruined our lives, we ruin theirs.”

*Well that didn’t end well.*

Brienne decided to try a different angle  “Your accents, they are is northern. Your lord was Eddard Stark.”

“Aye. He who the Lannisters betrayed and butchered.”

*Worse and worse.* She was terrible at this. She needed Sansa with her honeyed words or even Davos with his charm and common sense.

“The Lannisters and Starks were at war. That is years ago, and I had no part in that, nor did Ser
Podrick. I have since been the sworn sword and protector to Lord Stark’s daughter. Sansa would vouch for us, if that is what you want.”

The big man started to answer her, but two other men entered the room and he went silent.

“Come,” said the biggest one, a red haired brute with the look of the Vale about him. He beckoned them toward the door and she followed. There was little point in resisting. There were four of them, and she was nearly naked, weaponless, and with a broken arm. Beside her, Pod began to scuffle with one of the men, but after a look from her he calmed down. Save your strength for a fight we can win, she told him silently.

She had to crouch to get through the passages, carved as they were from rock with ceilings made for smaller men. Or children, she thought sadly. Did they not use children in mines? She couldn’t recall.

Years past, she would have been afraid in this position, as men led her through the tunnels, toward some likely terrible fate. But time had worn her ragged and hardened her heart. Mainly she felt frustrated, and somewhat embarrassed. To be ransomed or rescued was not a fate she wanted.

They came to a larger central room. There was a fire pit in the centre of the floor, the flames smoldering away quietly. Men and women sat or stood around the fire, or lounged against the walls. Some children too, hiding behind their mothers skirts and playing with makeshift marbles on the cave floor. She recognised a few faces from the inn. A girl with large brown eyes and perhaps the stableboy.

Were they waiting for us? She wondered, again. Surely not. They could not have known we would stop. Although they must have known we were coming, to pull off such a show.

Behind a trestle table in the centre of the room sat a woman, all in grey, cloaked and hooded. In her hands was Oathkeeper.

“M’Lady, here they are,” said the skinny man. “The kingslayer’s whore and the imp’s squire.”

The woman’s hands examined the blade. Long-fingered, white hands, with elongated nails. She traced the lion’s head, with its two ruby eyes.

When she spoke, her voice was eerie, almost hollow sounding, echoing in the chamber.

“They say all the important swords have names. What is the name of this sword of yours?”

Brienne didn't hesitate. “Oathkeeper.”

The woman laughed, a deep, rich sound that bounded from wall to wall. “A more ironic name for a sword I have yet to hear.”

Brienne stiffened. “Which oath have I broken?”

Another laugh. “Which oath have you kept?”

Pod drew a sharp breath. She again reached out and laid a hand on Pod’s arm. No.

The woman continued, voice mocking.

“You swore an oath to Renly Baratheon, to protect him. Your men say you killed him....”

“I did no such thing - “
“You hardly dissuade them. Any in any case, you failed him.”

The latter point Brienne could not deny, no matter the excuses that came to mind, or the desire to blame black magic.

“Yes, I failed. He died in my arms. But I am not betrayer.” She drew herself up to her full height. "Who are you?"

The big man chuckled before her. “She’s vengeance.”

For what?

“My lady, whatever you think I have done…”

“Can it be that my lady has forgotten the lady to whom you once swore service? Who you so deeply betrayed?” Said the big man, his voice gruff.

What? Were they speaking of Sansa? She had not betrayed Sansa, Sansa had sent her away. And Sansa was safe and protected in the north.

There was only one other. But that cannot be.

“You failed her daughters, you and the kingslayer both,” the big man said.

Lady Stark.

“I did what I could…”

“You did nothing. Lady Sansa was imprisoned, married to the Imp, and you did not seek to rescue her from him,” the woman’s voice continued, the mocking becoming menacing. “As an innocent girl wilted beneath the Imp's foul touch, you spent your time with his brother, the kingslayer, lusting for him like some cheap whore, gaping at him, longing for his touch…”

“I…” she faltered.

She could feel herself going red, the shame rising within her. Yes, she had longed for Jaime in those days, and those nights too. She had longed for his touch, for his company, for more of their strange, biting banter. She’d longed for him to try to be the better man she knew he could be. She’d seen the tension between Cersei and he, listened to him rant about it, hoped that he would free himself from her. Dreamed that he would choose her, even as she’d thought, then, that it could never be.

Had she really been that obvious? Had everyone seen it? The queen had. She cringed at the thought, her ungainly self following the handsome Lannister scion. No doubt people had laughed. They always did at her.

But what of it? Yes, I loved Jaime, even then. But I didn’t betray Sansa, not for him or anyone.

"I did what I could. It wasn’t enough, and for that I accept responsibility. But, I assure you, it was not through lack of trying."

“Your trying, if that it what it was, was incompetent. You lost her later, too, at the Inn. And then you stood and watched at Winterfell, while she was battered and abused and raped…”

“I could think of nothing else to do, I …”
“You lost Arya too. Battered her protector, caused her to flee to lands to the east…”

“I…”

Brienne could think of nothing to say to that, either. Yes, she had assumed the worst of Sandor the minute she saw him, fallen into the same trap many had with her. She had engaged in a stupid fight with him, while Arya fled. She was sorry for that. They were her failings. But they were not betrayals.

What did these men, this woman, know of her anyway?

“I concede failure, not oathbreaking.”

The woman hissed.

“And now you desert King Brandon, your king, so that you can keep fucking the kingslayer.”

She flinched, but held her temper. *Do not bite back*, Brienne told herself firmly. “I served King Bran faithfully and he discharged me.”

The big man laughed. ‘Lies! You asked to be released so you can go and fuck your lion.”

“Welp his filthy cubs,” said the smaller.

“She fucked a lion!” cried a third, one-eyed man from deeper in the room. “That is enough. She must hang.”

“Aye, it is more than enough,” said another. “Most o’ the men what we hung are born lions, but this one chose ‘er fate.”

“Hangins’ too good for the likes of ‘er!”.

"String her up!", "Watch her dance!"

The crowd of men was getting rowdier, and some of the women looked bloody minded too. She shared a quick look with Pod, but a warning one. *Don’t do anything stupid*. She surveyed the cave, trying to assess. Two dozen, maybe more, plus the women and the children. She couldn’t take them all. Couldn’t have done it armed and armoured, let alone nearly naked and weaponless.

“Where are my men?” She asked suddenly. “What have you done with them?”

“They were not your men, but kingsmen,” said the woman calmly.

“Aye, those two what lived, we might let ‘em go, them not being Westermen,” said one of the trouble-makers, the older man by the door. “Depends on you. We might send ‘em home with a message for your king.”

Well, at least they were alive. That was a relief.

“What do you want,” Pod asked then. Brienne almost smiled at him. *I probably should have started with that question.*

The woman laughed.

The big man answered for her. “She wants her husband back, her children alive. And she wants the Lannisters dead. Every filthy one of them. She wants to them to feed the crows.”
“And what do you want?” Pod asked.

“I want my brother back, my nephew his father. The others here, their wives or sons. These things are impossible. We cannot have restitution, or justice. But we can have vengeance. We want your heads, or at least Jaime Lannister's.”

They were resolved to this path, she could see that. She could not persuade them, she could not fight. They would seek their revenge upon Jaime by harming her. But Pod was no part of this.

“Let Ser Podrick go,” she begged, but they ignored her.

The woman held up oathkeeper. Her voice poured from the shadows of her cloak.

“The blade should be named oathbreaker, a fell and foul name, in common with its twin. Widow's Wail, that one is named. Does your Ser Jaime find that funny? Certainly, he has been the cause of many a widow's lament. Of, indeed, my mine own.”

Brienne felt her blood run cold. No, no. It is impossible. It cannot be.

The woman stood and lowered her hood.

*Her face.* So strong and handsome and familiar. Clear, blue eyes and long auburn. How many times had Brienne gazed on that face, admired it and loved it? *Lady Catelyn.* Brienne's eyes filled with tears.

“They said...I had thought...you were dead.” Her voice broke. “You were dead.”

_She was dead._

Brienne looked at her lady again. Still beautiful, yes. But her skin was too pale, near white, and her cheeks were sunken and sallow. There was no warmth in those features, no kindness or grace. She could have been carved from marble.

_She is dead,* she realised. *At least the parts of her that matter._

At the neck of what was once Catelyn Stark, a ruby glowed.

Beside her, Pod swore.

“I was dead,” Catelyn's mouth said. “The Freys slashed my throat from ear to ear. They dumped my body in a river. Harwin pulled me out, and Thoros gave me the kiss of life. I rose, but it was so late,” she grimaced. “I had been in the water...and even when they brought me back, I was a weak thing, twisted and bloated and useless.”

The little man grinned. “But the Red Woman died, and dropped her magic thingy.”

Brienne turned to look at him, startled. “That’s where I know you from. You were at Winterfell.”

“Aye, and that's where I saw you, whore, flouncing around with the kingslayer.”

She ignored that. “And you took that amulet of hers?

“He knew where it would be useful,” said Catelyn Stark. “Whose purpose could give it life.”

Brienne shook her head. Magic again. This was too much, too overwhelming, too unreal. Catelyn could not be alive. She couldn't be _here._ This could not be happening.
She met the eyes of her former lady.

"I never betrayed you, my lady. I swear it by the Seven, by my sword. I returned your daughter Sansa to Winterfell, she is queen now, and Arya was with her. I fought for them both on the Long Night. They were safe, and Ser Jaime was there to fight the dead…"

“Silence!” the woman cried. “I do not want your excuses and your lies.”

‘What do you want?’

“I want Jaime Lannister.”

Jaime. No. “Lady Catelyn, My lady, you do not understand - “

She held up her hand. “I want you to choose. We will release your squire on his word that he will bring the kingslayer to us. Then you will take your mis-named sword, slay him, and save your squire and yourself. Or you may instead choose the noose and you and your squire and your other men can be hung as betrayers.”

Pod. She looked to him desperately, and he shook his head. “I won’t do it, my lady. I won’t leave you.”

He wouldn’t, she realised. Have trained him too well.

Brienne fixed what use to be Catelyn with a hard, even look. “Ser Podrick is a knight, not my squire, and he is not mine to command. I will not make that choice in any case.”

There was a long silence, and Brienne was about to hope that she was right, that whatever was left of Lady Catelyn would not be so cruel as to force her to do this, and certainly not to Pod.

Then Catelyn Stark said “Hang them.”

No! “No, not Pod…” Brienne began. “He is…”

“I am with you the whole way!” Pod yelled back.

"Podrick has never harmed you. My father will ransom him, Jaime will ransom him…”

“We don’t want your filthy gold,” the smaller man said. “We want you dead, and Lannister too, and we want him to suffer. We’ll send him your ugly head, and Ser Podrick’s cock in its mouth…”

Brienne struggled as they grabbed her, pulled her, but with a broken arm she could do little beside kick as they bound her. The broken bones in her arm ground, sending pulses of agony through her body. Pod was hauled along beside her, although he managed to get a good hit at one and a headbutt at another.

The men dragged them out of the cave, up a twisting path and into the blinding morning light. The world glowed gold, from the rough edges of the cliffs to the sun-dappled trees. Lannister gold, like Jaime’s hair to used to be. She thought that maybe she would think on that. Think of Jaime’s arms around her as the darkness claimed her. It will not be so bad.

Except they were to hang Pod…

They hauled her a particularly large tree and slipped the noose about her neck, pulling it tight. The
stocky man tossed the other end around a limb.

“Let ‘er dance’” the little one said, as the stocky one and the tall one gave a yank.

Brienne felt the rope constrict around her neck, pulling her upwards, digging into her neck. She felt the skin tear and her throat tighten, shrink. The pain was terrible, nothing had ever hurt as much. *It should be quick,* she thought desperately. But it wasn’t. It didn’t end.

Her vision was blurring, but she could see Pod was being held by three men. He was screaming something... Screaming and howling. *He will be next. He cannot be next...* Call for the sword! But Jaime, she couldn’t kill Jaime. She couldn’t kill Pod. If she chose the sword, perhaps Pod would have a chance to run, to tell Jaime … but they would both come back and both of them would die and ... she opened her mouth...Pod was begging, pointing, saying something desperate and pleading and... *Pod, I must save Pod.* But the world started fading and when she tried to talk, to yell, to call for the sword, she could make no sound beyond a strangled gasp.

The rope gave and she fell to the ground with it, collapsing in a heap. She gasped for breath, coughed, choked.

"What...?" she croaked, as she looked up.

Pod was staring at her, painfully, his eyes large and sad and terrified.

“I’m sorry, Ser...” He was saying. “You’d can’t die You have to live...”

*You have to live.* That sounded so familiar. Had she not said something similar to Jaime? She nodded. Yes. She had wanted him to live, and she didn’t want Jaime to die. No, the Westerlands needed him to live...

“You can’t...Pod...”

“I’ll bring Ser Jaime,” Pod said to her gently. “I’m sorry my lady, but his life is not worth yours. Not to me.”

*No!* She tried to rise, but she couldn’t. Her simply gazed at him sadly. But then she felt hope.

*Yes,* she thought. *Go Pod. Go and run and never come back.*

But he must have read her thoughts. He shook his head slowly.

“I will be back, my lady. With Ser Jaime. Please, stay strong.”

**JAIME**

“What do you mean, she didn’t arrive?”

“She didn’t arrive at Deep Den,” the measter handed Jaime the message from the raven. “Her tail arrived, and she and Ser Podrick and the remainder of the men were expected the next day, but she didn’t arrive.”

“What the fuck were they doing leaving her?”
“She left them. Apparently she was feeling unwell, and ordered them on while she took a night in the inn.”

_Brienne was unwell?_ The idea was extraordinary. He didn’t think he’d ever seen her unwell, not even after she’d nearly drowned in wights and half of her was purple.

_I kissed it all better_, he remembered, inappropriately. _Gods, not the time._

“And the inn?” he asked, trying to get back on track.

“Empty. The innkeeper and his wife look to have been killed some time ago. Bandits may have been using it as a base, pretending to run the place.”

Jaime swore. _How the fuck could this happen? What the bloody hell was going on in the borderlands that this could happen?_

“Trouble”, “outlaws”, but no one seemed to be able to give him a straight answer. Not even the supposedly know-everything King Bran, whose solution had apparently been to send Brienne to sort it out.

_Presumably because he knew she wouldn’t say ‘fuck off I’m going back to get married and I’m done with this messenger shit…’_

No, she would never do that, and that Sense of duty was one of the things he loved about her.

Jaime swallowed down the rising bile and tried to get his anger under control. Would nothing ever go right? Why couldn't the world just fucking leave them alone?

He glared at the papers strewn across his desk. The wedding. The Great Council. Gendry and Davos would be arriving soon, and Sansa too. Food supplies, road building, port fees and customs duties and a trade deal with Dorne...There was so much to do, so much to organise, but he couldn’t think on any of it. He didn’t fucking care. None of it mattered anyway. Not without Brienne.

His mind filled with images of his wench, beaten or imprisoned or, _gods above_, dead.

He had to find her. _Nothing else matters._

And nothing else was going to get done, by him or anyone else, until she was back with him.

“I need to go…” he said quickly. “Help find her…”

Yes, he was leaving, and damn duty or propriety. Lord or not, he wasn’t going to sit in his castle and do nothing while his love was missing.

He went to make the necessary arrangements.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Genna warned him, as she farewelled him in the courtyard some hours later.

“I’ll do whatever I need to,” he stated in reply, possibly too harshly. He gripped the reins so tightly when mounting that his horse shied.

His aunt snorted, muttered something rude under her breath.

_Genna is not to blame_, Jaime reminded himself. But he couldn’t bring himself to apologise. A small part of him suspected that she didn’t even like Brienne and that suspicion made him
irrationally mad at her, made him want her to feel even a little of what he was feeling, because she deserved to.

But Genna didn’t seem overly offended by his anger.

“Jaime, sweetling, listen to me. I know you, and I know you want to fix the problem now, but you need to be wise about this. You cannot be rash, because you will look the fool, and a lord must always look wise. And you cannot let the smallfolk know that you are afraid. If you are afraid, they will be afraid, and you will never have respect or peace.”

*But I am afraid aunt, more afraid that I have ever been.* “I will not let them see my fear.”

“And you must let them see your weakness either,” she said, just as firmly. And by ‘weakness’, he knew she meant his feelings for Brienne. “Lords are lords because they are strong, Jaime. That is their duty, as a farmers is to plough. Remember that.”

She was giving him a forbearing, almost sorrowful look.

“Whatever you are trying to say, say it,” he demanded.

"You may not be able to save her, and you must prepare yourself for that.”

It hit him like a hammer blow. “I can’t.”

“Then you may have to do something hard and desperate. Are you ready for that?”

He gave her a disbelieving look. “I killed my king. What hard things do you think I won’t do?”

She looked at him sadly. "I don't know, Jaime. Perhaps nothing, but what will be able to live with after?"

He stared at the reigns, held in his left hand. What indeed? "What would you do?"

“The bandits have been active for months. Strongboar, on your orders, has been meandering around those hills, smiling at girls and tickling babes and buying watery ale, trying to charm tell from reluctant smallfolk. It is not working. No one is talking. They may love him, but they fear the bandits, and fear is more powerful than love. Be more direct. Put some of the local troublemakers to the hot irons, see who talks. Teach them the wisdom of trusting their lord, and the foolishness of not.”

Jaime frowned. That would be his father’s approach, to torture a few or even set Gregor lose on the lot. Let fear do the talking. He couldn’t deny the temptation was there, the urge to ride through the villages, threaten and demand until someone, anyone, told him where Brienne could be. How dare they not ... He could almost taste hot blood on his tongue.

But Brienne would never forgive him. And now would his people.

“They are already scared. What would making them more so accomplish? Someone might know something, others will say anything they can to stop the beating.”

“Then we beat them more for lying. Or we cut out their tongue.”

"Then they certainly couldn't help." He shook his head. “And when does it stop?”

Genna looked at him like he was a total idiot. “When you get your intended back.”
It sounded so simple. He didn’t have it in him to argue.

He turned his horse, called to his escort, and headed out the gates.

A few days travel at a breakneck pace found him on the outskirts of Strongboar’s camp, on the edge of a rugged line of mountains.

“The smallfolk won’t talk,” Strongboar said, confirming everything that Genna had said. “Last man that talked, his village no longer exists. They’re not protecting them, they are bloody terrified. Of us, of the bandits, and the rains and the night and the bloody grumpkins under their beds.”

Smallfolk. Jaime ground his teeth and scrutinised the map laid out on the camp table. This is the legacy of my father, he thought. Of the war, and of the Cleganes and the chaos and uncertainty. The Westerlands had been stripped of soldiers, of protection, of good lords and reliable sheriffs and even the local strongmen. Too many had gone seeking glory, or been drafted, leaving fields and families to fend for themselves. They have grown insular and untrusting and with good reason.

It will take work to make them trust us again, and more to make them love us. Jaime thought of Ser Arthur Dayne, and his work against the Kingswood Brotherhood. He had paid the smallfolk for their food, taken their grievances to the king, made them feel safe and protected. Everything I kept telling Cersei to do, but not once did she listen. He could do the same, with time. But for now he had to find the bandits with little help and no time. It was near impossible. Abandoned and ruined mines dotted the hills, and the caves went still deeper. But he had to try.

He refused to contemplate not finding her. Surely I would know if something had happened to her.

“We’ll go through every bloody mine, one by one if I have to,” Jaime promised, to himself as well as Brienne.

“We’re trying, my Lord,” Lewys Lydden, Lord of Deep Den, said. “But there are a thousand bloody years worth of the things, and for all we know they’re moving from one to the next as we search.”

Jaime doubted that. “No, they can’t be, they took Brienne and her men. There would need to be a good number of them to do that. They’ll require space, a base, food and supplies. There have to be signs of them somewhere. Someone’s feeding them, probably not willingly. Try harder.”

Lydden bowed his head. “Yes, my lord.”

Jaime could hear the doubt in his voice, and knew he did not know these mountains as Lydden did. Time, we are so short of time. His aunt’s words tortured his mind. Don’t show weakness, don’t show fear. They love us but they fear the bandits and fear is stronger than love. Is it? Jaime had done stupid things for love, never for fear. But if the smallfolk feared for the ones they loved, well, then they would never cooperate.

hostages would explain much.

"The bandits are likely keeping prisoners," he said. "Find out who is missing from the villages and then report back to me, but do it gently."

The men nodded, and left.

And what will I do when they return? he wondered. Strongboar was a good enough man, but he liked a fight and rarely questioned orders. It Jaime told him to go into a village and take men for
questioning, rough them up, he’d do it. He'd do whatever was asked of him, probably. Lydden was also the kind of man who would not object, no matter what was asked. But what would he ask? *My father would have done anything*, he thought. *If Joanna had been taken, he would burn every village to the ground until someone spoke.*

*I would have done it for Cersei once, too.*

*Probably.*

*Why not Brienne?*

Suddenly, he felt sick. He couldn’t think. He needed to be alone, outside, away from prying eyes. *I need to go somewhere private so I can lose my mind in peace.*

Jaime left the keep and wandered into the courtyard. He was clenching his hands, real and imaginary, and he felt the nails on his good left bite into his palm. The pain was cathartic. He wanted to hit something, or someone. Or kill someone, preferably one of the fuckers who had abducted Brienne, but he could be flexible on that. He could already imagine the delight of running his blade through the soft skin of a bandit’s stomach, the satisfying wet sound, their scream as their guts fell to the ground.

*No, I cannot think like this.*

*Brienne could not want me to do anything rash.*

*Brienne would not want any innocent person hurt.*

*That’s why I can’t do what Genna wants, what Lyle does too. Not because I love her less, but because I respect her more.*

But it was so hard. He didn’t know what to do anymore. So many opinions, so much advice. Be strong, be careful, be compassionate, be decisive, don’t be rash, make them love you, let them fear you, don’t take any shit.

He needed Brienne. She’d know what to do. He'd take Davos in a pinch too, but the Onion Knight was likely still days away, and he didn’t have that long. He didn’t know how long Brienne had and we wasn’t prepared to risk it.

He’d leaned against the wall, feeling the hard brick against the back of his head, trying to get his thoughts, his temper, his impulsiveness under control. After a moment, he collapsed to his haunches and put his head in his hands.

Fuck it, but he *did* care for Brienne more than he cared for any random person, any other person really, except maybe Tyrion, and that was that.

*That’s me, that’s who I am.*

He loved, and he did anything for love, and let the world damn him for it. But he prayed to whatever gods would listen to give him wisdom and restraint, before he did something that he, and she, and probably some other innocent soul, would be bound to regret.

A cough sounded, and Jaime looked up to see a very uncomfortable looking house guard standing uneasily in the doorway.

“Ser…” the guard said, hesitantly.
Jaime pushed himself to his feet. “Yes, what is it.”

The look he gave the soldier said best if you pretend this never happened. The man shrunk under the glare.

“Ser, Ser Lyle sent me to summon you. There is news sir. Ser Podrick has been found...”

BRIENNE

Brienne forced down the hard bread that they served her for her daily meal. It was unappetizing but she was hungry and she knew that she wouldn’t get anything else. She ate slowly, bite by bite, trying to stop her stomach from heaving it up. After she ate, she lay back down on the thin blanket and waited for the nausea to pass.

She wondered if she had hurt something, deep inside herself. Her bowels, maybe. She couldn’t remember being hit in the stomach, but she didn’t recall much of the fight. Other than the teeth at my cheek. She didn’t want to remember that. She touched her cheek. It was still bandaged, but it barely hurt.

She had no idea what the time was, or how long she had been trapped, other than that she’d had seven meals of bread and six of the pale, watery soup, but whether she was fed once or twice daily she really didn’t know. Did it even matter, in a cave, with no sun or light? Yet despite her pain, each day was a blessing. A day that Pod was further from her, that he may come to his senses and run.

But he won’t. She knew that. Nor was she likely to die in the meantime and free him that way, and she had no means of ending it herself. Or telling him if I did.

When they had cut her down from the tree they had taken her back inside and sent the closest thing they had to a master to treat her - a midwife who “knows a bit about cows and horses and women too.” She’d set Brienne’s arm, again, as best she could, and treated her cheek again too. Otherwise she’d refused to speak to her, as had almost everyone else. Absent the occasionally taunt, they had largely left her alone.

She was still wearing the simple linen shift, with nothing under it. It rode up and made her nervous about sleeping. But at least it made one thing easier, she thought, as she waddled over to the chamber pot to make her water. She wondered, passingly, what would happen when she got her moonblood.

Moonblood.

She froze. How long had it been?

She’d never been very regular, or at least, she’d never really had that much reason to check. Her moonblood was light enough that she would manage in the field with some cloth and occasionally moss. But there had been no hint of blood on her thighs for weeks.

Not since before Casterly Rock, she realised.

Her stomach did a somersault. Then sunk.
I may be with child, she realised. I may be pregnant.

The night with Jaime at Casterly Rock, he'd spilled inside her. Three times. Perhaps the seed had taken root.

She should be overjoyed. All the fears that she was barren, that her unwieldy body was not womanly enough to create and nurture life, all unfounded.

But why now? Why now, when it can be used against me, against Jaime.

Suddenly she felt an immense fear for the little cub within her. Her mind revolted at the thought of what this lot, what the thing that had been her lady, would do if they knew she was to birth a Lannister babe. She had to conceal it somehow, or they would use that against her too, against Jaime. She had to protect it. Nothing else mattered.

She would need to fake moonblood, but how to do what with no knife and no wounds? She would need to find a sharp rock, something. She would need to search the room.

But she didn't. She couldn't move. Instead, she rested her head back against the blanket, and let the feeling of both joy and desperation wash over her. She felt tears formed in her eyes. She let them fall.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I borrowed heavily from a Feast for Crows (my favourite book). It's kind of an adaption like in the showverse so I even stole some dialogue.

This is a much harder BwB than in the books though - they have headed further down the extremist line and Catelyn has been through even more horrors.
PODRICK

Brienne hung before him, her hands bound behind her back, her legs kicking, her face purple and swollen. Her writhing, fighting body swung left and then right and then collided with another, a form cloaked in gold and white and red. The lifeless body of Lord Jaime.

He didn’t want to look. Don’t look.

Irresistibly his gaze was drawn back to Brienne, and when he gazed upon distorted face, her eyes opened. They were blood-red, pain-filled. The look she gave him was nothing but disappointed sorrow.

“You doomed us all,” she told him, her voice hollow and choked. “You are no knight. No son of mine.”

There was something around his own neck. Someone rough. It burned.

The world dropped beneath him. He heard a crack.

His own neck had broken.

Pod woke up with a shout, his feet kicking at the dirt. The noise caused a flock of small, brown birds resting in the nearby trees to startle and take flight. He jumped at the commotion, then took a moment to regain his equilibrium, and his breath. He waited until his heart stilled and his hands stopped shaking before he crawled out from the small gully he’d slept the night in, yawning and dusting himself off as he did.

The Brotherhood, if that was indeed who they were, had bundled him out of the caves, bound and blindfolded, ridden for hours, and then set him on his way, with not so much as a penny to his name. No horse, no armour, and only a second-rate blade likely salvaged from some murdered Lannister soldier or bannerman in case he run into some other bandits.

That had been days ago. He was, surely, lost. But he had something going for him. He was, at heart, a Westerman, and while he had grown up many miles from these rugged mountains, he knew how to shelter in caves, find hidden streams, and trap hares, even if he was absolutely terrible at cooking them. So while he was, yes, lost, he wasn’t dead and he was not likely to become so soon unless he was most unlucky.

Still, to get back to Casterly Rock, to Ser Jaime, would take weeks on foot. Weeks during which
Brienne was in danger. He couldn’t allow that to continue any longer than absolutely necessary. Pod figured he would try to make his way to the nearest town and hope there was a measter or sept or local lord with a bird to Casterly Rock. How he would pay for it was another matter. He could promise the king’s assistance, he supposed, but that would be stretching the measter’s credulity. How could he claim to be doing the King’s business dressed in worn cloth and leathers.

Who is ever going to believe I am a kingsgard? I hardly believe I am a kingsguard!

Still, he wouldn’t know until he tried, so he continued his journey over the rocky outcrops and low hills. Yet as he walked, the guilt gnawed at his stomach, worse even than the hunger.

Guilt about leaving Brienne, and about betraying her, even if was for her own good. It was probably the first time he’d actually disobeyed her (other than that time he didn’t use her incredibly complicated method of hobbling the horses…), and his fear of disappointing her, or her rejecting him, burned like acid in his stomach. Better she be disappointed in me and alive than pleased and dead.

Guilt, too, about what he was going to do to Ser Jaime, although his guilt here was a pale shadow of what he felt about Brienne. The elder Lord Lannister had always been fair to him, never cruel, but he’d always been distant too, a little condescending, too focused on Brienne and Tyrion to ever really engage with him. So different to Tyrion, who has treated him with magnanimous generosity. Not that being friendly means much, he reminded himself quickly, thinking of Bronn. Bronn was always friendly and look how that turned out. Still, Ser Jaime had cared enough about him to get him out of Kings Landing. He introduced him to Brienne and kept him alive on the wall, and shared drinks and jokes, and for that he owned him gratitude. He didn’t want him dead.

And yet I am going to be the death of him.

For Brienne.

Yes, that made all the difference, didn’t it?

Pod was sure that Lord Jaime would willingly die for Brienne anyway. Rumour had it he actually tried to die with her crazy bitch sister, and surely Brienne was clearly more deserving of such a sacrifice than her. Jaime definitely would have willingly died for Brienne at Winterfall. And hadn’t he tried to charge Drogon with a pike once? That was so reckless it suggested that Jaime was just willing to die generally, as long as he could do so heroically or self-sacrificingly or something like that.

So why not die saving Brienne? Surely Jaime would be glad of the opportunity?

At least that is what Pod told himself, to make himself feel a little better, as he made his way through the barren hills of the Westerlands in search of something that resembled civilisation.

But if he was honest with himself, there were deeper, darker feelings inside him too. Feelings he didn’t want to examine too much, because they suggested a darkness that he did not wish to acknowledge. A darkness that now calculated the relative value of each life, weighed them against each other. The darkness in him didn’t particularly care whether Jaime wanted to die or not, or even whether he in fact died. Brienne had to live, and if Jaime’s life was the price of that, so be it. The only question for Pod was how to get Jaime there, alone, without the hot-headed Lannister doing something typically stupid. And how to do it in time. He doubted the Brotherhood was very patient. Every moment put Brienne’s life at risk.

Sighing, Pod tried to drag his mind back to his surroundings and surveyed the rolling hills and
crags. There was a ridge of slightly higher hills to the east, over a crevice. He scrambled down it, and then up the other side crevice, hands grasping at the loose soil and tuftety grass, ignoring the way it cut into his skin.

*If they were serious about me getting help, they would have given me a bloody horse,* he thought despondently.

He pulled himself onto the rise, only to come face to face with one such creature.

*A horse.*

A nuggety, brown rouncey, all of fourteen hands high, wearing a bridle, but no saddle. The horse stared at him dolefully through its big, brown eyes.

Pod stared back. He looked around. There was no one as far as he could see.

“Where did you come from?” He asked quietly.

The horse didn’t answer.

He held out his hand to the beast, a mare. She threw her head, stomped a little, but didn’t take a step backwards. It was as if she was waiting for him.

An idea came, half formed, crept into the back of his mind. Despite his reluctance, it fought its way through. *Surely not...*

“Your Grace?” he asked tentatively.

The horse just watched him. But she didn’t move away from him, and nor did she complain as he reached out and took the reins. Casting a final, furtive glance around - the last thing he wanted to do was be charged with horse rustling - he vaulted onto the mare’s back, and turned her toward the west.

**BRIENNE**

As the hunger gnawed at her stomach, Brienne remembered lemoncakes and honey rolls with Sansa.

They had shared the tiny delicacies on a terrace beneath the partially restored Red Keep, overlooking Blackwater Bay. The wind was soft and warm, filled with the smell of salt and lavender and the cries of gulls. The taste was sweet on her lips, a little tart and tangy on her tongue.

It was a lovely memory, almost enough to draw her attention from the rumbling of her belly and pain in her arm and her cheek, the constant clawing fear in the chest. She tried desperately to cling onto it.

Sansa had looked radiant, her hair flowing red and gold in the morning sunlight. *She was wearing a silver dress, with dark grey embroidery, some pinkish details. Roses, maybe.* It hugged her narrow waist and flared over her hips. Beautifully flattering, but wasn’t everything flattering on Sansa? She could make a feedbag look glamorous. Look svelte in platemail.

*They took my armour,* Brienne thought. *And my clothes.* She shivered in her thin shift. *Think on*
Sansa’s dress, she thought. On what it would be like to wear it.

Brienne tried to picture herself in it, but she couldn’t. *I’d probably just trip on the hem, and then Jaime would try and catch her.* His arms around her wouldn’t be so bad. *But I am so heavy I’d take him down too...* she pictured that and smiled. When was the last time she’d worn a dress? The trip to Harrenhal? She’d worn the stinking thing for a day or so until Jaime had secured her a shirt and some breeches.

She’d worn dresses on Tarth, sometimes, but she had never tried to be fashionable - she had longed learned that that way lay humiliation and jokes about sows in silk. She hadn’t wanted people to think that she thought she would look pretty if she tried. Septa Roelle had ensured she’d never believe that, scolding her for any such pretensions. But she did notice changes in style, in what other women wore, if only because it said so much about the mood of the people. Kings Landing was no exception.

When she’d left Kings Landing with Oathbreaker at her hip and Jaime’s eyes on her back, the fashions had been flowing and light, hair and breasts on display. By the time she returned to Dragon Pit, the Tyrells were dead and their flowing clothing gone, replaced with stiff, conservative outfits, long sleeves and high neckline, kerchiefs and veils. The queen had been traumatised, shamed, and she covered her previously exposed skin. Her subjects followed suit.

The last year had seen a gradual return of breezier clothing, lower necklines, unbound hair on maidens. Brienne’s light blue shirt had blended in. But, sadly, Sansa had let the new style pass her by. Even in the warmth of King’s Landing, Brienne’s lady still wore high necks and long sleeves. Like Cersei, she had suffered the abuses of unwanted attention on her body, and Sansa bore the physical as well as emotional scars. Scars much worse Brienne’s battlemarks, for they carried memories of deliberate, malicious harm. Brienne had seen those scars once, when they shared the baths with her at Winterfell, and she remembered the candle light glinting off the red and silver marks. The intimacy had demonstrated Sansa’s trust in her, but Brienne had barely noticed, consumed instead with a rage such as she’d never known at Ramsey and Littlefinger and all the men who’d abused her Lady, as well as admiration and protectiveness for her. In the aftermath Brienne had felt then that she could spend her life in the shadow of her beautiful, strong queen, and never regret it.

But then Sansa had sent her away. Jaime had returned. And everything had changed.

She did not wish to think on that. *Not now.* Not here in this death trap, with stone beneath her back and over her head.

Pain loomed at the edge of her mind. Darkness too. Her cheek, she knew, was ruined. The girl who tended it had had told her as much. A little thing with the grey eyes of the grey north. She’d even smiled as she poured boiled wine on the wound.

“Don’t want you to die before your beloved gets here,” she’d said, and Brienne had had no idea if she was genuine or facetious. What did it matter? Later the girl had torn the dressing off with glee, and Brienne knew she’d intended to be cruel.

“Not even your sisterfucker will kiss that cheek.”

Brienne had wanted to strike the girl, overpower her, escape. But she was weak. *And pregnant. It is not just my life at stake.* Any attempt then, even now, days later, would be suicide. Instead she forced down the food, and paced when she could, and listened and watched and waited.

And went away inside, when she could.
She pushed the memory of the smirking girl away, grabbed for better ones, sweeter ones.

Sansa. The sea.

“I cannot believe that you forgave him,” Brienne remembered Sansa saying, as she delicately nibbled on the edge of one of those cakes with her perfectly straight teeth.

Brienne had felt defensive, protective of Jaime, but Sansa was her friend.

“There was nothing to forgive, not really. Nothing I couldn’t anyway. For all Cersei’s faults, he loved her, he tried to protect her, but in the end she died, and now he is free.”

“He left you in the middle of the night to ride back to his sister,” Sansa scowled. “You deserve better. And let’s not forget his other sins. I know you don’t wish me to list them, but you must understand that I cannot forget them.”

“He has changed, Sansa. I wish you would give him a chance.”

“I can’t. But I don’t need to, because you are the one marrying him, not me. And you are going to be living very far away, so as long as you don’t mention him any more than minimally in correspondence, I’ll probably be able move past my murderous intentions toward him and forgive you your dreadful taste in lord husband…”

Brienne opened her mouth to respond, but there was a slight glint in Sansa’s eye that suggested she might have been joking. A little bit. Anyway, there was no point in arguing.

“In any case,” Sansa said, “I have no doubt others say much the same thing about me and mine…”

Yes, Tyrion, Brienne remembered, summoning the memory of his face in her head. Smiling, a flagon in his hand. We had talked about the other Lannister. Sansa’s Lannister. Tyrion.

“Tyrion thinks that you have come to end things with him,” Brienne had explained, hoping as she’d said it that she wasn’t breaking a confidence.

Sansa smiled, a soft thing. “Does he? He is mistaken. I would actually like to stay with him. It gives me a degree of protection, and I have no intention of marrying anyone else. But the North will not tolerate a Lannister heir, not even one who killed his loathed kin. Perhaps especially not. They wish me to marry a northerner. There is much to work out. But who better to do that with than Tyrion?”

Brienne’s shock must have shown.

“You are surprised? I admit he is unconventional. But I am long past adoring men like Loras Tyrell. Tyrion has proven loyal, if perhaps not quite as wise as I first thought. He knew me a long time ago, before I was a queen, when I was a child, before … well, before everything. I sometimes feel I can let myself be that girl again with him. That he won’t judge me, because he knows me and I don’t have to pretend with him.”

Brienne thought on that, on the sadness in those words, and in Sansa’s chosen path. “That sounds…well, very sensible.”

But then Sansa had grinned.

“And the one good thing will be that we will be sisters…”
Sisters...sisters...sisters...

In her mind the gulls were crying it. The light crew dim,

The words echoed through Brienne’s head as she came back to the room. The cold air, the hard stone, the stink of unwashed bodies and fouled food. she didn’t want to be here, and kept her eyes clamped shut.

Sister.

Yes, a sister. Her sisters had all died, but not Sansa. Her lady was alive. When they married Jaime they would be sisters.

Why was thinking of Sansa’s family so painful?

And then she remembered.

Sansa had another family.

Has.

Her mother...

Brienne eyes flicked open. Awareness consumed her.

Sansa’s mother is here. And Arya’s too.

The woman the Brotherhood called Lady Stoneheart. The woman with the cold dead eyes who had tried to hang her. That woman was not just her Lady Stark, the woman to whom Brienne had sworn her loyalty. She was Sansa’s mother.

Of course Brienne had known it, known that from the moment she saw the ghoul of Lady Stark. But she had not wanted to think on it. Not at all. She had to Break her oath and kill her Lady’s mother.

Only that thing wasn’t Sansa’s mother. It couldn’t be.

Could it?

No, it could not. Not the Catelyn Stark she had known. Not the woman who had mothered those girls. Her would be sisters.

She couldn’t go away anymore. She had to think.

*I may have been released from my oath, but I still need to protect them,* she thought desperately. Brienne knew if there was one thing she had to do, it was ensure that Sansa, and Arya for that matter, never had to confront whatever it was that was living in her mother’s body.

**DAVOS**

Davos read and re-read the raven scrolls, trying to comprehend what had happened while he was on the boat. The Westerlands were being raided and food sources destroyed. Lady Brienne had been captured by some degraded remnant of the Brotherhood without Banners that was determined to wipe out every Lannister and Lannister bannerman they could find. Oh, and it had taken Lord
Jaime something in the order of a quarter hour to decide to leave his castle, his army, his guards, and his responsibilities, to chase after his lady. With Podrick Payne. And no one else.

“I used to love seatravel,” he sighed resignedly. “But every single time I am out of reach of a raven, these so-called ‘greatfolk’ do something foolish and everything goes to shit.”

Gendry glanced up at him with a wry smile on his lips.

“Er...no offence intended m’lord,” he added.

“You know as good as me that I don’t really count as ‘greatfolk’,” the Lord of Storms End replied, awkwardly.

Davos would usually argue with the lad on that point. True, his grand titles still sat uncomfortably on broad shoulders, but the boy had a strong sense of responsibility. Reassuring him seemed to be wasted breath right now though. The Brotherhood wanted Lord Jaime, and he was going to right them. Likely walking - no, striding, arrogantly- into some kind of trap that would result in the deaths of he, Brienne and Pod. Or the buggering of the West some other way.

And Davos was days away from them.

“The Brotherhood…” The onion knight muttered, tracing his shortened fingers over the broken seal on the scroll. He hesitated only a moment, then handed it to Gendry. “Do you know anything about this, my Lord?”

Gendry took the scroll from his hands, unwound it and squinted at it. He brow wrinkled.

“Is this even Westerosi?”

Another fellow child of Flea Bottom, Gendry’s education was haphazard and his reading was worse than Davos’, and Jaime’s writing was so truly appalling that between the three of them they were lucky to be able to communicate anything over a distance.

“The measter’s addendum explains it better,” Davos offered.

Gendry read that, and then handed the letter back to Davos with a frown.

“The Brotherhood. I dunno...” He said, frowning. “They sold me to the Red Witch before all the magic really started. I lost contact with them after that, ‘cept when Thoros and Beric and some of their mates turned up at the wall.”

“You spent months, longer, with them. You must know something, something that will help.”

“No. I mean, most of the Brotherhood, or what was left of it, came north with Beric and Thoros. But there were some ...” he paused, considering his words. “Harder men, who didn’t agree to go north. Beric said they were rascals, outlaws, not much more, but I didn’t know them. Them that came north, they had some tell, rumours, that Thoros was keepin’ alive more than just Beric.”

**Keeping alive, or raising from the dead?** Davos felt himself shudder.

“Well, think harder, lad,” he said, firmly, ignoring the fact Gendry was now technically his Lord.

“I’ll try. But I didn’t hear anything more, I swear. Never.”

Gendry was honest, and earnest, and Davos believed him, but he also couldn’t blame the boy if he just didn’t want to think on it. Those were dark days. The memories clearly affected the lad, but
this was not a time to let his affection prevail. He needed Gendry to think.

Davos looked back at the scroll. There was more to this story, of that he had no doubt. Something that stopped Bran seeing it. He wished he could not work out what it was, but nothing in his varied life as smuggler, hand, soldier or small council member prepared for this.

*Nothing but that night when I watched the red woman birth a demon, at any rate.*

Now there was something he didn’t wish to think on.

*Secrets hidden under mysteries, meaning hidden between words.*

He sighed resignedly. “Well, Lord Jaime is probably going to go and do something profoundly stupid to get his lady back, and when Lannister does stupid things, wars tend to follow. We better get up there and see what we can do. I’ll find us the fastest horses we have, but we’ll need to get a move on. Particularly if we’re gonna make this bloody wedding with both parties intact.”

Gendry snorted. “So, no chance of gettin’ a good sleep in a proper bed then?” he asked resignedly.

“You’ve gone soft, lad?”

“Hard not to when your so-called subjects don’t let you do anything but sit on your ass and listen to folks whine.” Gendry rolled his shoulders. “Let’s get goin’ before they work out I may be doing something more dangerous than eating lamprey pie without first giving them an heir.”

Davos chuckled, and the pair headed down into one of the dozens of courtyards in Casterly Rock. It really was bloody enormous, and a ridiculous waste of space. *You could hide the population of Lannisport in here,* Davos mused. But maybe that was the purpose? Back in the days when lords were said to care about their people.

“I’ve got to take care of a few things before leavin’,” Gendry said. “But not much. Not much for me to do, really.”

*He’s bored, Davos realised. In that, he’s like his father.*

From what Davos had heard the Stormlands almost run themselves. The one thing Stannis had done was instill order and discipline in his greatfolk and rigor and obedience in his courtiers and banner men. Gendry was smart enough to listen and not fuck things up, making him much more like his uncle than his father in most other ways, all things considered.

Gendry continued his commentary as they made their way across to the armoury and stables. They would need weapons as well as horses. Davos much preferred to talk his way out of sticky situations than fight, but something told him that this situation was going to get much too messy for that. Gendry continued his commentary.

“A Moon ago, I’d been sure there was nearly nowhere worse than be worse than Storm’s End.” Gendry was complaining. “I was buried in accounts, memos, briefings, and bored out of my mind. Now you’re making me relieve the worst couple of weeks of my life, and that may just top accounts. I’d thought being a lord was about eatin’ good grub and dispensing justice and tilting in lists-”

The boy’s diatribe came to a sudden, strangled stop, and his legs followed a second later. He almost tripped, and then through apparent sheer luck stumbled into an upright position.
Davos followed his gaze to a small figure, sitting on the rail outside the armoury, eating a pie.

Gendry’s voice, when he spoke, was close to a prayer.

“Arya…”

Davos blinked. Wasn’t she meant to be on a ship? Sailing west? The girl had a remarkable talent for getting round and popping up in places, but jumping across the sea seemed implausible. She looked good. Better than anyone who’d just finished a sea voyage had a right to look. Slender and tanned, her hair longer than he remembered.

“Hello, Lord Baratheon,” she grinned. “Ser Davos.”

“Lady Arya,” Davos bowed his head.

He glanced back to Gendry. The boy looked like he’d been hit in the head with a mallet.

“What are you doing here…” He stuttered, disbelievingly.

She gave him a rueful grin. “Repairs. We hit some cunt of a sea monster.”

Gendry blinked. “What?”

“Bloody thing came right at us!” Arya began, clearly wanting to tell this tale. She continued between mouthfuls of pie. “Gosh, this is good, but not as good as Hot Pie’s. Anyway, we were all pretty hungry, you know, for something that’s not dried beef or pickled cabbage. And this huge thing comes alongside the ship. Big and black and blue. So, Taron decides he’ll try and capture it, right, because we were all looking forward to fresh meat. He managed to throw this spear, big bugger, and it struck the monster. But then it, cunt of a thing, it turned, opened its fuckign jaws, and attacked. The ship! Then it retreated, and it came back. Charged at the hull, and put a hole in it, right above the waterline, some couple of feet from the keel. We managed to seal off the hole in the hull, but we were lopsided. So, we limped back. But we think we got a glimpse of land, and found a little island, so I call that a win.”

Davos’ mind was too old and slow to process that, but Gendry didn’t seem to be doing much better.

“And so you’re back…” Gendry managed, still staring at her in shock. And something else Davos did not want to think about.

“Yeah.”

“So, um, are you going again?” he asked tentatively.

She leaped up, to stand before him. “Not right now. Gotta get the ship fixed. Learned a few things, too. Things we can improve on before we try again. Thought maybe we’d get one of those scorpion things, for the sea monsters.”

Gendry stared at her, his eyes lighting up. “That might take some time to make.”

‘Weeks…” she agreed, moving closer to him. “Maybe longer, to get food and such.”

They were very close together, oblivious to the old man standing next to them. Davos would have liked to have slunk away, but he really needed into that armoury.

He coughed, once, and they both jumped, but didn’t move very far away.
“Um...I’m going to get meself some armor and a horse. Maybe you can fill Lady Stark in on what is happening.”

And with that, he got out of there as fast as he could, leaving the two young people to their reunion.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, it’s a bit of a stretch, but Moby Dick aside, whales did occasionally attack ships: https://www.canadiangeographic.ca/article/how-often-do-whales-attack-ships

It’s a better excuse to come home than scurvy.
JAIME

Catelyn Stark

Catelyn Fucking Stark

Who in their fucking right mind would bring back Catelyn Stark?

No one, Jaime told himself firmly. No one in their right would resurrect Catelyn Stark.

She was annoying enough the first time around.

“These people are fucking insane.”

Podrick flinched under the weight of Jaime’s anger, but Jaime found he didn’t really care. Podrick was part of the reason Brienne had been captured, after all. If the kid had just been paying attention rather than staring down the bodice of some tavern wench...

“Yes my lord,” Pod’s earnest voice cut through Jaime’s furious thoughts, “they’re mad as rabid dogs, and one of ’em bites like one too. But that’s why they want you, my lord. They’re brutal. They only care about revenge.”

Jaime nodded, and gave the boy a hard glare. He looked half dead on his feet, skinny and hollow-eyed and covered in mess, with a poorly-healing wound on his head. His nails were torn to the quick. Jaime felt a small, grudging kind of guilt for yelling at him, but not enough to apologise.

“Where are they?”

“I don’t rightly know…” Pod began. At Jaime’s frustrated look, he added quickly. “They blindfolded me, ser, and they marched me around a bit before releasing me. I don’t even know where that was, as I had to wander a while before I found the horse. They said to head back to the inn, the old inn on the Gold Road past Deep Den, and that they would find us. Only if it was me and you. They said if I told anyone, or brought anyone else, they’d kill her.”

Of course they will.

Jaime closed his eyes for a moment as the world shook about him. I have no choice then, he thought, even though he knew it was a bad idea to do what they wanted. There was no guarantee turning himself over would save Brienne, or do anything other than give the Band of Bastards a very valuable hostage. A hostage they could use to demand a ransom that would bugger the realm. Then they could kill him anyway, and Brienne too.

But at least if I confront them there is a chance, he thought calmly.

A small part of him wondered if the honourable thing to do was to just kill himself, and take the prize of murdering him out of contention. But, no, that would guarantee Brienne’s death. Another part of him contemplated just sending Pod to offer a lord's ransom - all the gold in Casterly Rock if necessary. But that may not work either. Trust Brienne to find the only outlaws in Westeros for whom it really wasn’t about the money. No, they just want me dead.
But fuck it. They, the Brotherhood, had Brienne. His life was a small price to pay for saving her, for even the chance of saving her.

“They wanted me to trick you,” Pod continued, after a moment, “wanted me to think of some excuse to drag you back into the wilderness. But I can’t see any reason to do that. I know you well enough, my Lord, to know that if I ask you to do this to save Brienne’s life you will. There is no better way to get you there.”

That gave him an expected flush of pride, enough to smother the realization that most people probably thought he would decline to save Brienne’s life over his own.

“Of course I would.”

But Lady Stark wouldn’t know that, would she? She would assume the dishonourable Kingslayer would think his own life worth more than his lover’s and that he would need to be deceived to come. He wondered if he could use that. That could be his greatest asset.

“And if you get me there, she will release Brienne, unharmed?”

“That is what she said, my Lord.”

There was a hitch in his voice. Pod was putting on a brave face, but Jaime could hear the doubt in the boy’s tone. He doesn’t believe any of us will survive. Truth be told, Jaime didn’t either. Catelyn Stark had been hard as nails, ruthless too, and there was no reason to believe she’d become more compassionate now she was dead. She would have made the right lord a very formidable wife, he thought idly. She had been absolutely wasted as the wife of the of-so-honourable Ned Stark.

Jaime sat back against his chair and tried to think of a plan. He longed for a drink to dull the raging emotions, but he did not want to take the edge of his mind. It could be fuzzy enough lately.

Pod’s brain seemed to be working even faster. “If we were to attack them, find them and attack them…?” he began, but trailed off at the stormy look on Jaime’s face.

“How? You said you can’t find her, and blindly wandering around looking for her will remove any prospect of surprise. And if we attack, they’ll just kill her. And maybe others too…”

Jaime thought of the other people Strongboar had identified as stolen from their villages. Many had been girls, young girls. A few mothers, including a couple with babe’s at breast. He tried to picture the faces of those young girls and women, but try and he might he couldn’t summon any real emotion for them. Not like he could for Brienne. He couldn’t quite contemplate how she managed to constantly care for so many people without collapsing under the weight of that stress.

Still, it would be wrong to let them die. Brienne would not approve, would never forgive me, and it would make me a poor lord, besides. He needed to find another way.

Jaime ground his teeth. “So the plan is we get on our horses, ride into the hills, and hope to be found and captured?”.

Pod nodded resignedly. “Yup. It’s probably our only option.”

"It is a very stupid plan." But not my first. And in any case, I have no choice.

“And then what…?” Pod continued. The boy looked terrified, but resilient.
“I don’t know.”

Jaime still didn’t know when they hastily left the castle, nor when they paused for the night - the few hours left of it - along the side of the dusty trail that these days passed for the Goldroad. A cool wind rustled the sparse trees and flickered the flames of the fire, putting them both on edge as they ate a quick meal of dried meat.

They’d left Deep Den quickly, with minimal supplies and little in the way of notice. He’d tried to pen a letter to Davos, but in the end had given up and accepted the maester’s help. The contents would be shared with Strongboar and Lydden within moments of him leaving the castle, but it couldn’t be helped. Better to let them know where he was going anyway. He’d left express instructions for Lyle, instructing him not to follow. If they had any sense they’d at least wait a couple of hours before disobeying that order and creating an obvious tale.

But Lyle does not have a lot of sense.

Now, sitting by the fire, Jaime’s mind was still reeling, grasping for ideas, and no plan was forming. Catelyn Stark, after all these years. And she had him over a barrel.

Yes, he’d sworn to return her daughters to her, and he’d failed at that. But part of the reason had been that Catelyn had died, something he’d had no hand in it, and that had made the returning part rather difficult. And then he’d found Sansa married to Tyrion, which made things even more complicated. And Brienne seems to think that may not end so badly anyway, he reminded himself, a little indignantly. Then Winterfell had fallen, her brothers were dead, Jon was on the wall, and despite the fact Brienne had nagged him daily to release her, he had no idea who to. You didn’t just dump a girl like Sansa in the street and tell her to go forth. After that, everything had gone to shit, and Sansa had vanished, and the only thing he could think to do was send Brienne to find her. That the quest - and how Brienne had wanted one of those!- had got her, and Pod, out of Kings Landing, away from his sister and his father was the added benefit.

And Brienne had done it. She’d found Sansa. Arya had come home too. Bran was king. Jon had pissed off someplace where he didn’t have to shoulder any responsibility, which was hardly likely to upset Catelyn, who Jaime recalled as being cold to the bastard. Edmure was back at Riverrun. The fucking Starks had won the war and the Tullys had done alright too.

Catelyn Stark should be blowing kisses at me, the thought moodily.

But she never would never stop hating him. Not with Robb and Ned and the youngest one dead. And Bran crippled, lets not forget that.

No, kisses were very unlikely.

He glanced across the fire at Pod, a grown man and a sworn knight now. Your greatest gift, Brienne called the boy. Jaime had been slightly offended by that, truth be told, and it still stirred a little jealousy in him. Podrick and Brienne had shared more than he and Brienne had, perhaps more than they ever would. Still, he could use that too.

Jaime caught the young man’s over the fire, gave him his sternest look.

“Podrick,” he began slowly, adopting his most commanding, fuck-with-me-not, voice. “It’s me they want, not you or Brienne. If there is any chance, any chance, for you to get away, you are to take Brienne and run. Do you understand?”

Pod shuffled his legs uncomfortably and looked nothing short of bereft. “I would love to promise
you that, my lord. But I can’t make her do anything. She’s twice my weight and can beat me blind in minutes.”

“Well, do something untoward then. Hit her, drag her, surprise her, I don’t care. If she’s too stubborn to leave me then you have to make her.”

He shook his head. “She won’t leave without you, you know that.”

*But that is where you are wrong, lad.*

“No,” Jaime said firmly. “She won’t leave without *you*.”

Pod seemed to contemplate that for a moment, and then nod. *An agreement, of a sort.* Jaime supposed he should be happy, but he could feel the jealous snake uncoiling in his stomach, ready to bite. It wasn’t just a matter of love, he told himself firmly, but of responsibility. Pod was still her responsibility in a way he would never be. *Her responsibility in a way my children should have been mine, but I failed them.*

“You can’t just give up,” Pod murmured.

“I’m not going to. I haven’t come all this way to end up dead by the hand of some cursed Stark, let alone some half-starved runts. If they kill me, it won’t be without a fight, and a bloody one at that. But I am not going to risk you, any more than I have to, because that’ll risk Brienne. And if I die, you bring my men back. Bring them back and make sure every last one of the bastards dies.”

*That,* at least, he could plan. He just needed to set his mind to the rest.

Yet after days of travel, when they reached the inn, he still didn’t have anything else that resembled a more comprehensive one.

*Improvise, that’s what you do best,* he kept telling himself. But improvisation was for situations where only his life (and once Bronn’s... *why the fuck did I ever protect him?*) was in danger. Improvisation was too high risk here. But how do you plan for what you cannot foresee?

The inn was a ruin, just as had been reported. It had been burnt sufficiently long ago that it was cool, and the charcoal crumbled beneath his touch. He shuffled through the ashes, thinking despondently of the aftermath of the Battle for Kings Landing. That seemed like another life ago. *It really was.* Still no plan came to mind. He resigned himself to waiting.

He didn’t have to do so for long, before he heard the thunder of horses hooves. The outlaws had arrived.

“Ser Jaime Lannister…” one said, as he approached.

Jaime turned and looked up slowly, trying to ooze contempt from every pore despite the fear gripping his chest. *They have Brienne.* It went round and round his head like a waterwheel.

He faced a handful of men on scrawny horses. Boiled leather, scavenged greaves and gorgets, dented helmets, rusted blades and warhammers. Hardly impressive. Even in his diminished state, he could probably kill one or two where he stood. *Dorthraki these are not.* But what would murdering them achieve? Other than a moment’s satisfaction? They would still have Brienne.

He pulled himself up to his considerable full height. “That’s Lord Lannister to you …” he said arrogantly.
“Lord of sister-fucking incest and child murder,” said the man at the front. Broad, younger, northern accent.

“Lord of lies,” said another, behind, with truly dreadful teeth. Yellow tooth, Jaime named him immediately.

Jaime managed an insouciant smirk. “I think you’ll find I prefer the brutally honest truth. And that truth is that I am going to ensure that you die painfully if anything happens to Ser Brienne.”

Pod came to stand beside him, but not before giving him a warning look. Step carefully, he seemed to say. These are dangerous men.

But so am I.

The young, stocky one at the front appeared to be the leader. Boiled leather, a blade, clearly trained in warfare. He looked familiar, another relic of a past age. He searched his memory as best he could.

“I know you,” Jaime peered at him. Gods what was his name? Harvin? Hallam? “You were a Stark banner man.”

The stocky man nodded, slowly. “Still am.”

“Then you’re very bad at reading maps. Lady Stark resides a couple of weeks that way.” Jaime pointed in the general direction of what he hoped was north.

The stocky man was unmoved. “I have no time for your japes, kingslayer.”

He shrugged. “Very well. If it is not my charming company what do you want?”

“My lady wishes to pass on her regards.”

Not the answer he was expecting. “Social visit then? How kind of her. I’m content to receive her here...” He looked around dramatically at the ruined furniture. “Although we may be short a few chairs...”

A clinking of weapons and ropes made it clear that socialising of any kind would have to wait. These men were not amused by his attempt to talk to them. "I suppose I'm calling on her then..." He began, but stopped with the quips when he felt a steel tip at his back.

He did as he was bid, and climbed onto his horse at sword point. Pod did likewise. They set off, and he was surprised to find he would not have to endure a bag over his head.

Unafraid of revealing the location of their camp. Or their faces. This does not bode well.

They rode for what seemed like hours. Jaime tried to keep track of the distance and landmarks, but they seemed to pass the same scenery again and again. It was disorienting, and he couldn’t help but wonder if there was some kind of red magic at work. He’d had enough fucking sorcery.

Still, the camp when they got there, was far from magical. More a cesspool. The would-be rebels made their home in an abandoned, roughhewn mine. Filth and refuse of all kinds littered the ground outside the mine. No attempt had been made to hide the place and Jaime was surprised the smell alone didn’t draw animals, if not men. Two guards in clearly salvaged armour stood by the door, which was covered by a poorly tanned animal skin. They were watching two scrawny women washing clothes in a bucket of muddy looking water. Jaime did not like the look of either of
them, and he felt Pod stiffen too. The girls stared resolutely at the bucket.

Jaime dismounted and followed their escort through the entrance, Pod on his heels. Once inside the cave it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim light, and his nose to adjust to the smell of unwashed bodies and souring food. In the corner, a small group of women huddled against a corner beneath the glow of a tallow candle, needles in hand, darning something. Another, older woman sat near them, whispered something harsh to them when they looked up at Jaime’s entrance. A few boys had stopped a game of jacks to stare at him too. He felt a prodding at his back, and took a step forward. His foot connected with a discarded bone, the marrow licked out. He couldn’t see a dog, and he could half imagine one of the feral camp followers gnawing at it.

There was no sign of a leader, other than the stocky man. Harwin. But then he heard a voice from behind him.

“Kingslayer…”

He knew her immediately. The imperious, righteous tone, dripping with contempt and condescension. Drawing a breath, Jaime turned to face Catelyn Stark.

She stood behind a wide table near the door, mostly cloaked in shadow. Dead, he reminded himself. And yet not.

“Lady Stark. Looking beautiful as ever.”

He almost meant it, too. For a woman who had apparently been slashed ear to ear and then discarded in a river, she looked rather fetching. She had all her skin and most of her hair, and merely seemed to lack a little colour. She looked nothing like the wight he’d found locked in the castle, nor the hordes he’d faced at Winterfell. She didn’t even look like Dondarrion, with his missing eye and unhealed wounds and somber air of fanaticism.

But then he looked into her eyes. Her eyes were cold and dead.

At her neck, a ruby glowed.

Time stretched long and taught as they stared at each other, but it was Lady Stark who spoke first.

“You foul our home with your presence, kingslayer.”

“Hardly my fault, my Lady, when I am here at your command. In any case, I doubt I smell worse than the last time you saw me.”

She hissed at that. Hissed like a snake. He shuddered.

“But I fully understand that you’d find my presence undesirable, given the terms upon which we parted. So, if it pleases you, I’ll just take the Lady Brienne off your hands and me and my stench can leave…”

She hissed again. “No.”

He opened his mouth to offer another retort, but his voice died away at the sound of more feed and a sharp, pained gasp. Bound by the wrists, Brienne was shoved into the room through a doorway, a man behind her. She stumbled slightly at the sight of him, and his own knees felt weak and wobbly.

She looked up, anguish in her eyes. “Jaime. No…” she whispered, voice rough from disuse.
Gods be good. Her face was a mass of purple and her cheek was red, raw and swollen. Anger broiled in his stomach, and he could hear his blood pump between his ears.

Brienne’s eyes were on him for but a moment, and they then flew, looking for Pod. When she saw him, she moaned.

“Pod… You should have run…” She sounded like pure despair, but he could hear relief, maybe hope, there too. Something is amiss.

“Forgive me, my Lady, I had no choice,” said Pod.

You did, Jaime thought. And you made the right one.

Jaime tried to take a step toward Brienne, but the blades hastily raised between the two of them drew him to a halt. Briefly, an image from years earlier flashed through his mind, of Brienne trying to come to his aid as he lay in the mud, horsepiss and vomit in his beard. Waves of longing and terror hit him at one.

He met her eyes. I love you. Trust me.

He would get them out of this. He had the space of a dozen breaths to work out how.

Jaime forced his gaze away from his betrothed and back to what had been Catelyn Stark.

“It seems you have the advantage my lady. What would you have of me?”

“Justice.”

He grimaced. Another trial then? How many fucking trials can one man endure? “If you’re punishing me for past sins, I am afraid you’re too late. I have been tried by your son and your daughter, given a reprieve by one and a pardon by the other. You’ll just have to wait till I commit another crime …”

Harwin hit him across the face, and his head snapped back.

“Maybe I’ll start by murdering him. ..” Jaime muttered.

Harwin hit him again, this time hard in the stomach. Jaime bent double, the wind knocked out of him. Brienne yelled at him to stop. Several retorts formed in his mind, but when he opened his mouth, he was too short of breath to talk. Probably a good thing.

“My lady…” Brienne began, clearly deciding to press the same arguments in a more conciliatory manner. “Your own son has pardoned Ser Jaime…”

Lady Stark shook her head. “Both trials were mummers farces, organised and manipulated by his brother, the imp. We accept only one trial here…”

She reached out and picked up Oathkeeper where it lay on the table.

“A trial by combat?” Jaime asked. Wasn’t that what Dondarrion gave the Hound?

There was sporadic clapping around the cave. A show for the men, then. So be it.

“Against my sworn sword, my champion.” Lady Stark agreed.

Champion. The word was laden with bitterness, but there was no doubt who she meant. Brienne.
He looked over to her, and she met his eyes, briefly, then turned to Catelyn Stark.

"My lady, you swore that you would ask of me no service that would dishonour me. To ask me to do this, to fight my betrothed for you, is dishonourable. To allow him to undergo the travesty of justice here is dishonourable too. If I must fight, it will be for Ser Jaime, not against him.

Jaime expected outrage, even violence, in response to such a declaration, but Catelyn answered with a bitter laugh.

"Do not be foolish," she sneered. "You are in no state to engage in combat, and I would not ask it."

"I need no champion - " Brienne managed. But there was something in her voice that caught, a hitch. Jaime frowned. "And I chose no champion."

"Ser Podrick must take her place..." Lady Stark continued, calmly.


Catelyn waved her hand dismissively. “If you will not duel Ser Jaime, Ser Podrick, Lady Brienne will need do so.”

Jaime swore in disbelief. “This is the most fucked up game I have ever heard of. She loses her husband or her son? Why punish Brienne? What would you have done, Lady Catelyn?”

“I never had that choice. You killed both.”

He snorted. “I killed neither.”

She fixed Podrick with a cool glare. "Choose."

Pod simply stared.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Jaime ran through the options He could submit himself to judgement, but Pod would not just kill him, and even if he did it would destroy the boy. He could kill Pod, although with one hand it would be close. Probably. What was the boy to him? He had killed so many boys in his lifetime. Fourteen, sixteen, years old, with fuzz on their faces, calling for their mothers as they died. He’d even tried to kill Bran, and what was he? Ten? But this is Pod. He knew Pod. He liked him. Seven help him, he cared for him. And Brienne would watch me do it and would never forgive me and I am not giving Catelyn Stark the satisfaction of that.

Jaime watched as Pod slowly held out his hand, still torn, and Lady Stark smiled her cruel, taut smile. Harwin took Oathkeeper from her, and delivered it to Pod. The boy gawked at it, and back at Brienne. And then the boys stilled, calmed. Something passed between them, and he doubted it was about the sword.

Pod examined the blade in his hand, whistled. And then he frowned.

“Very well. Give Ser Jaime my sword,” he said, after a moment, voice shaking. “This is Valyrian steel. If the fight is to be fair, we should be properly armed.”

Harwin raised an eyebrow, and Catelyn Stark nodded. Harwin turned and retrieved a smaller blade, a shortsword and handed it to Jaime. Jaime stared at it in shock.

Widow’s Wail. Pod had Widow’s Wail!
But of course he did. Who else would she had given it to?

Jaime felt a momentary surge of anger. Then Pod winked at him. Widow’s Wail was shorter than Oathkeeper, necessitating closer combat, a more aggressive style of attack. Too close for many knights, and possibly not ideal for Pod. Harwin may consider him at a disadvantage if he used it, but Jaime was practised with it. He felt a rush of gratitude for the boy. But no need for these scum to know that. Instead, he summoned every inch of indignation, and looked at the blade aghast, and then up at Brienne.

“You gave him my sword? My family sword?” He demanded of her, accusingly.

Brienne looked shocked, as if hardly believing he would raise such an issue now. “You left in in my rooms. I thought you were dead!”

“I thought you would want it as a momento!”

All eyes were on them and their little drama now, a low murmur of amusement, some chuckles rising from the outlaws and the women. Perfect.

‘A momento …” she snorted, through her bloodied face. She gets it. Clever wench. He hoped.

“After you left me. Why would I want a momento?”

There was some guffawing from the brotherhood now, even a nervous giggle from the girls. Jaime became aware of the number of eyes were watching the drama unfold with delighted malice.

“Why?” He narrowed his eyes for dramatic effect. “So you can remember how magnificent I was when I took your maidenhead…”

This time a round of hoots and catcalls radiated through the cave, erupting into genuine, bawdy masculine laughter. Brienne’s face went red. He’d have to apologise later. The moment of inattention was all that was needed, and Pod knew what to do. As the crowd roared, the boy crossed the few steps, and slammed Oathkeeper into Harwin’s back.

There was a wet thunk, and the sound of crashing. Harwin crumbled to the ground where he stood, blood bubbling from the gaping wound. A woman screamed. The cave erupted into chaos.

Jaime saw Brienne lunge for Harwin’s discarded sword. She was still bound, but she slid onto the floor, grabbed it with both hands and came up to face a grinning adversary. I fought like that, he vaguely remembered. Our first fight, on the bridge. But he couldn’t dwell on that now. He barely ducked a blow coming at him, and launched through the other man’s guard, Widow’s Wail biting through his opponent’s leather gambeson in a burst of blood and viscera.

Women and children yelled, and so did some of the men. He heard, rather than saw, the twang of a bow. Fucking archers! At least he could close easily. But everything was moving. Jaime tried to focus on the room. Too many non-combatants. He couldn’t tell who from who…He heard Brienne yelling at people to leave - “go, go, go, run,” - but then more screams. Men were standing at the doorway. Are they blocking the women? Brienne had a sword, defending herself, and maybe others, against another man. Pod was to his right, near Lady Stark. Then he saw Pod scream as an arrow struck his side. He moved toward the boy, but nearly took a blow to his side as he did.

Concentrate.

He saw a shadow, heard a shuffle. There was someone behind him. Without thought, he turned and swung and hacked, and a line of red opened on a man’s arm, the Valyrian steel cutting straight through the leather. Careful, it could have been one of the women. The cave floor was now slick
with blood. He swung again, and another man leaped away from him.

_Cowards, all._

“Desist!” “Halt”

Someone was yelling at him to stop, but the blood was pounding in his ears. Another arrow, a flash of pain in his arm - the right one thank the Seven. He lunged toward another figure...then noticed a third man, just in his field of vision, holding a girl before him. _What the ..._ He had to find Lady Stark. ...

“Jaime, stop!” The voice again. _Brienne’s voice._

Instinctively, Jaime obeyed, pulling up short. His blade was raised, but he did not let it fall.

Brienne stood some feet from him, a body at her feet, her eyes fixed in front of her. There, Lady Catelyn stood with a child in her arms, a girl, and she pressing a knife to her throat. The girl’s eyes were huge and brown, filled with terror and tears. Bran Stark’s had been large, too, Jaime remembered, unbidden. Only grey. Bran’s had held surprise, this girl’s tears.

He looked around the cave. Others of the outlaws had grabbed women too, holding them or pointing their weapons at them.

_Hostages._ _This was the purpose of the hostages._

Pod was struggling to his feet, weaponless.

Jaime lowered his blade a little, but still held it ready, blood dripping onto the stone floor. He could hear it. _Pat, pat, pat._

“Enough.” Catelyn Stark this time, her voice hollow. “Enough. Put your swords down, and no further harm with come to _them..._”

_Them._ To the _hostages._ Not to _them._ His people. Brienne and Pod.

He hesitated. So did Brienne.

“Why are you doing this?” Brienne asked, her voice cracking. “This is not you, my lady...You would not kill an innocent.”

Lady Stark was as contrary as usual, her voice was soft, lilting, but firm.

“Would I not, Lady Brienne? You are wrong. I slew Lord Walder’s wife. _Before..._” She twisted the blade, and Jaime watched calmly as a single trail of blood burst from the wound on the girl’s neck. _“Before._ Lady Frey was a young girl, too. Innocent. She did not chose to be a Frey. I dragged a blade through the soft skin of her throat. I felt it tear, felt the cartilage rip and crack beneath the steel. I will do it again. Don’t make me do it again, Lady Brienne.”

Brienne visibly swallowed. She reached out to steady Pod. Her hands were bloody, but loose. Jaime pushed down his own barely contained panic. _No, don’t do this Brienne, don’t surrender._

“Do I have your word?” Brienne asked, slowly. Her voice was little more than a whisper. “On your honour, by the king, your son, and by the Gods Old and New, that if I surrender no harm will come to these girls.”
“You are no position to bargain,” Catelyn said, “but, Lady Brienne, you do.”

“Don’t trust her, Brienne,” Jaime warned.

Lady Stark’s hand tightened, twisted, and the bubble of blood on the girl’s throat became a trickle, running down her neck.

Jaime’s eyes flicked from Catelyn to the girl’s, and then around the cave. They had killed a half a dozen men, but more than that still stood, including the bowmen. They were a raggedy lot, ungoverned, and now without one of their leaders. But I still need to take out the others. Or at least Lady Stark. Could he reach her? He was a couple of dozen feet from the table. Near a half dozen swordsmen that could close in that time, but several held a hostage, and that would eat seconds from their ability to respond to him.

There were also two archers with bows were on him - clearly Catelyn thought the hostages wouldn’t be enough to stop the kingslayer. Two archers, maybe four arrows. Well he could survive an arrow or two, unless they were particularly well aimed. But the table… And they could loose the arrows at Brienne. He could nearly feel the arrows aimed at him, but Brienne was unarmoured, and the bigger target. The better target.

“Jaime…” Brienne said softly. There was a plea in her voice, but to do what he didn’t know.

The girls were whimpering, a child sobbing, the one in Catelyn’s grasp actively crying, shrinking away from the cold, hard point of the knife.

He swallowed, and gripped the blade harder.

“Lower your blade, kingslayer…” Catelyn’s voice was ice, mocking.

If I act now, the girl is dead. If I drop the blade, we are all as good as dead.

He made his decision.

"No, I don't think I will."

Catelyn Stark hissed. Hissed, like a snake. Brienne flinched. A slight movement, but she knew what was coming.

Stark raised a hand, as if to signal a loosing of arrows, but Jaime acted quickly, used his most commanding tone.

“Think carefully…” he demanded, channeling his father as he glared around the room, trying to let his anger and contempt flow into his eyes. “Think very carefully, before you raise that blade or loose that arrow. You know who I am. You would not be here if you didn’t. You know what I am capable of doing. The dead king? The maimed child? All those things you have heard about me? They’re true. I did them.” Well, not the Red Wedding, but I don’t have time to explain that...

“And do you know why I did them?” He paused for dramatic effect. All eyes were on him. “I did them for love. Of my sister, my brother, my family. And now you, you fucking idiots, have my wife. My wife. So think, for the moment, what I am prepared to do to you. If you think I am going to let you harm her and walk out of here, you are fucking delusional.”

“Archers…draw” One of the men commanded, a large one near the back. Their would-be new commander.
Jaime cast him a contemptuous look. “You may loose those arrows, you may defeat me, but I will kill several of you first. Brienne will kill several more. Ser Podrick might manage one too. No doubt you’re too fucking stupid to do maths, but that’s bad odds for any of you. And if perchance, you do kill me, kill all of us, before we kill you, what do you fools think will happen when I don’t return? My men are already looking for me. My brother is hand to the king…”

“The kingslayer lies,” Lady Stark said. “There are no men at the door.”

But no one appeared to be listening to anyone except Jaime.

“You, you who are so eager to lead,” Jaime directed his gaze to the new captain. “Did you know that we have oubliettes beneath Casterly Rock that fit men as tight as a suit of armour. You can’t turn or sit or reach down when the rats start gnawing away at your toes. Noble knights have died whimpering in those coffins, a king or so too. If you’re too fucking wide to fit in, we have a rack to take care of that too…”

Despite his best efforts, the man went pale. One of the archers hands was shaking so badly Jaime wondered if he would loose an arrow by mistake.

“And I have plenty of cousins and friends who will find you and ensure you experience one. Now, drop your bloody weapons, and walk out of here and I may, may, forget what you looked like…” Jaime commaned.

There was a sudden smell of urine and shit in the air, although from one of the hostages or one of the bandits Jaime didn’t know. But no one moved. The silence was broken only by the sounds of a whimpering hostage. Several girls stared at him with surprisingly dry, almost awestruck eyes.

*All right then, eight men and Lady Stark,* Jaime assessed quickly. He glanced at a Brienne who nodded.  *We could take them…*

“Do not listen to his honeyed words..” Catelyn said, her eyes still filled with anger. “Remember what he, what Lannisters have done. Your wives, your children...are you too craven to avenge them?”

“Lady Stark!” This time it was Brienne who spoke. “if you will not listen to him, listen to me! I have told you before, Ser Jaime has changed. He serves your son, as do I. I understand you are angry, but this will not bring your child back. This will not help you heal.”

“You understand.” Catelyn was incredulous, “What would you know of children, of family, either of you?” She turned to Brienne. “You who are so unnatural as to deny your capacity to carry them?” And then to Jaime, “And you who considered his little more than a squirt of cum.”

Brienne flinched at that, likely at both the words and her lady saying them both. *Oh good, another memory dragged up to be revisited in front of her.*

“Please, my lady…you are mistaken.” Brienne continued. She was taking slow, cautious steps toward ... something. “I do not know much about children, but I know about loving them.” She paused slightly, took a breath, and then she looked directly at Jaime. “I am with child.”

Jaime felt as if he had been punched. *No, no, not here, not now ...* Joy and pain and fear as he had never known hit him, a shock worse than the bricks on the keep. He groaned, felt his knees go weak. Like the cave was collapsing around him.

The figure that had been Catelyn Stark also gasped.
Brienne pressed on. “I carry my firstborn inside me. If you slay us, if you kill my child, an innocent. You are not this person, Catelyn. I know you are not. Please my Lady, show mercy...:” Brienne said softly.

“Mercy…” whispered Catelyn, her voice distant, like a dream.

The archer captain, the big man, swore brutally. “I'll not kill a pregnant woman, my lady. Order the death of the kingslayer, but not his whore. We are not the Freys.”

A silence fell at that. And then what had once been Catelyn let out a singular, painful, anguished cry. The blade bit into the neck of her hostage, perhaps unintentionally. The child shuddered and cried, but Catelyn held her tight.

“I tried to kill your child to save mine, Catelyn,” Jaime said calmly, as he took a step toward the wailing figure, then another. “...and I lost them all of them anyway. It nearly destroyed me, and so many others. Do not let these men make the same mistake...”

Catelyn’s hand was shaking on the knife where it lay against the girl’s neck, a rivet of blood trickling down her neck. Her eyes were no longer dead, but wild, torrid. She was fighting herself, pulling herself above the rips. Jaime took another step, and he noticed Brienne approach from the other side. She had Oathkeeper now.

He gave her a warning glance, a message. They could speak without words.

“I promised you I would see your daughters home,” Jaime continued, as he approached the trembling form. “I didn’t, you’re right, but Brienne did. We have seen your son on the throne and we serve him faithfully. Your daughter rules the North. I’m sorry for what happened to the rest of your family, but I can’t change it. I am not going to die for it, and you’re not going to kill anyone else.”

Jaime finished. He closed the distance between them.

“Jaime - “ Brienne began. But he didn’t let her finish. The decision was not hers and he wouldn’t let her make it. He swung the blade.

Brienne acted simultaneously, pulling the girl free, and thrusting her blade into Catelyn Stark’s body at the same time.

For a moment, both blades flared with a blue-white light in the darkness, blinding them.

Then the blades fell dark, casting the cave back into the dull yellow candlelight. Jaime blinked away the afterburn.

The amulet fell to the ground with a flash of red and a tinkle.

Lady Stark’s head rolled across the floor.
The burst of light had left stars before Brienne’s eyes. She blinked rapidly, trying to regain her focus, yet afraid to do so. When her vision cleared, her eyes fell on the body of her former liege lady, crumpled on the stone floor. Lady Cateyn’s head lay some distance away, separated from her body by a smear of thick, blackish blood. Inhuman blood. It continued to dribble from her neck, like molasses. It should have spurted, Brienne thought dully. And I should be crying, as I did when she died the first time. Yet all she felt was relief, a little fear. And nausea, always that constant nausea now. Oh, here comes the rest of the feeling. Pain. It hit her like a morning star. Her arm was suddenly a blaze of red-hot agony, the poorly healed bones rebroken, and her cheek burned as if branded. There was blood in her mouth, where she’d bitten her damaged cheek. Her heart in her chest ached too.

She heard a whimper. She was still holding the girl, the frightened child, and holding her much too hard. She released her grip, horrified, and the small figure scrambled back away from her, eyes wide with fear. No, I am here to help you, she thought. But her mouth was dry. The floor lurched to one side, then rose up, and Brienne found herself on her knees, dry retching. All that came out was blackish green bile. Her stomach had little to spare.

“Brienne!”

Jaime was at her side in moments, kneeling. He rested his stump of her back, but he held a blade in his left hand. Widow’s Wail. Did she still have hers? Her fingers clasped the air and dirt. She searched the floor, found the hilt and tightened her right hand around it. Oathkeeper.

The cave was near silent, other than Jaime’s beleaguered breathing near her ear, the hiccupsing whimpers of the traumatised girl, and soft sobs of a couple of others. Brienne made herself look up. The men, and several of the women, were staring at them in awe, eyes wide and mouths open. There was a clang, as one dropped his blade to the floor.

Pod! She looked around, found him a few feet away, kneeling, his left hand holding an arrow near
his hip, but his right stalwartly clenching a dull, chipped blade that he had driven to the ground as a crutch to help him stand.

Get up, or they could finish us now, Brienne told herself desperately. She felt Jaime tense beside her. She grabbed his hand and he heaved her back to his feet, his own legs shacking.

“We are too old for this,” he murmured to her under his breath. She nodded. He steadied her, then scanned the room. She could almost see a shield of anger and disdain fall over him.

The Kingmaker, she thought. He’s still there.

“The offer still stands,” Jaime announced, sharply, his voice full of superior indulgence. “Leave now and I might forget your faces, if you’re very lucky, and very fast.”

Silence. For a moment, a long, tense moment, Brienne feared the bluff would fail and the men would fight. But then one outlaw, a scrawny figure near the door, backed out of it, hands in the air. Another, the one who had dropped his blade, followed quickly, and another. They were leaving.

A woman half stood, legs trembling. Brienne wanted to reassure her, but she could barely speak. Her throat was parched and her mouth tastes like bile.

“You can stay,” Pod said to her, calmly despite the obvious pain he was in. “We’ll protect you.”

The woman nodded, but she trembled still, her eyes fixed on her and Jaime, as if they were monsters. Brienne couldn’t blame her. Their swords had glowed. Glowed. She had no idea what that meant, but it probably wasn’t good. Magic so rarely was. She looked down at the blade. It was silver again, unmarked. She cast a look at Jaime, and he shook his head.

“Forget about the bloody sword! Are you all right?” He started patting her down - arms, chest, checking her head and then her face. He bit his lip and swallowed as he examined her cheek, thumb gently caressing the skin of her chin.

“I’m fine Jaime,” she whispered. “Just tired, and a bit worse for wear”.

He nodded, but his eyes remained fixed on her face for a moment, before he turned his green eyes back to meet her gaze. “And with child…” he said in awe, almost shyly, which was not a look she ever expected to see on Jaime.

When she nodded, he leaned forward and kissed her gently. Kissed her despite the blood on her lips, the inflammation of her cheek. Kissed her as if they were alone, safe, together. The world ceased to exist. Then Pod coughed, and Jaime broke away. She felt the colour rise to her cheeks.

“Right then, rescuing to do…”

She glanced over at the doorway. “Jaime, those men…we can’t…”

“Will be caught, and punished. I only said I might forget, and that is very unlikely…” He stood and scrutinised her again. “Stay here, I’m going to check for any further surprises.”

Brienne watched Jaime make his way past the injured girl, giving her a quick glance over, and then to the perimeter of the mine. She staggered over to Pod, sword still firmly in her grasp. Her wrists were raw and bloody where they had been bound, and her feet felt like they had been dragged over knives. A rib was badly healed and her face ached and ached. Her chest tightened at the look on Pod’s face when he saw hers. Horror. But he covered it quickly.
“I’m fine…” he said, struggling up as she closed on him.

“You won’t be after I am finished with you,” she muttered. She started searching him over, pushed his hand aside to look at the wound.

“Hey, you’re not my commander anymore, you can’t give me the bad shifts as punishment...wait, ow!”

“Sit still!” She put a restraining hand on him as she examined the arrow head. “It’s not deep but we need to get it cleaned to stop any corruption.” She poked the skin of his stomach. “Lucky for you you’ve gone soft and added some padding.”

*And lucky you were never a beauty,* she assured herself, as she again caught the look on Pod’s face.

She relented. “I’m fine too, Pod, or I will be. And I’m grateful. Thank you.”

He beamed.

She tended to Pod, and then some of the women, and one injured man. In between she pulled a jerkin and breaches off a dead outlaw, all squeamishness about such things having been lost years ago, and pulled them on.

Jaime secured the mine, confident his men would find them. Something about the feel of the place had *changed* with Lady Catelyn’s death, they all agreed, something Brienne could, like a mist dissipating in the sun. More magic.

Finally, with no further excuse to delay, Brienne braced herself and made her way tentatively across the rocks, to the remains of Catelyn Stark. Reluctantly, she bent over the body. It was emaciated and withered, clammy white skin and swollen fingers, missing hair. *She’d was dead. Dead in the river, dead when she hung Pod, dead when she questioned me. Already dead when we killed her.* It should have made Brienne feel better, but it didn’t. It just made her feel sad, and angry.

A flash of light caught her eye. Lying in the black was something red. *The ruby chain.* The stone was winking to her. She glanced back over her shoulder, saw Pod had his eyes closed. She shuffled over, and picked it up.

The Red Woman’s necklace. She thought back to the evenings of storytelling that followed the long night. What had Davos said? That after Melisandre had removed it, she had greyed and died. Well, after it fell from Lady Catelyn she was once again a waterlogged corpse.

*It heals you,* Brienne realised. *Makes you young, and whole. Beautiful.* She fingered it, tracing the rivets on the stone, the gold chain. *No, nothing can do that. But perhaps, just a glamour, to fool the eyes...*

She sat slowly back on her haunches. In the calm of battle, her cheek ached. It was torn and ruined, she knew, the infection burning. It would scar. She had scars on her shoulder, her hands too, above her mouth, and likely her neck and wrists now. Her broken nose. A tooth knocked out in combat. And her child ... Her child was as like to be as beastly as her as she was as beautiful as Jaime, another awkward and ungainly girl who would suffer the indignities that her mother had ...

She ran her hand over stone, allowed the warmth to carcass her skin. *A glamour, like the tricks Arya can play.* What harm was there in it? *But how could I know the answer to that? How could I risk it?* She couldn’t, of course. *She would need to destroy the stone...*
“The cavalry has arrived,” Jaime announced from the door, interrupting her thoughts. “Quite literally. They seem to have forgotten about everyone who isn’t mounted, but they can help …all of you, up, let’s go.”

“Good,” she said.

She picked up the ruby and the chain, and shoved it into the waistband of her borrowed breaches. Then she went to help Pod stand.

**Two months later**

Brienne pulled the disturbingly low cut dress higher up over her chest. The defiant, silky fabric slipped straight back down again. Sansa really would have known better.

Not only was she not used to wearing quite so little fabric, but she wasn’t used to having quite so much to hide, never having had much to fill out a corset, let alone a hint of cleavage. Truth be told, she found breasts annoyingly intrusive, always *there*, but on the positive side, Jaime was rather pleased with them, paying considerable attention to them whenever he could get his eyes, hand or mouth close enough, which was whenever they had a moment alone.

Despite being somewhere past the halfway mark in her pregnancy, she was barely showing otherwise. “You’re so tall the baby can recline,” the midwife had joked. Jaime had been worried, but she was taking the word of the maesters and the midwife that the baby felt fine. She could feel the child moving inside her now, the tiniest flutters of a butterfly in her stomach. The downside was the constant need to piss, and she struggled to contain that urge even as the wedding speeches continued. She wiggled uncomfortably.

Ser Davos was the first to rise. He looked at least as uncomfortable as her, and nervous too, tugging at his own doublet. It was cloth of silver, a good look on him, the threads glinting in the light that filtered through the impressive windows of Casterly Rock banquet hall.

The Lannisters never did anything by halves, and this towering room with its vaulted ceilings and gilded chandeliers was proof of that. Even hosting a large wedding, it was barely half full.

Granted, even to have a ‘banquet hall’ was unusual. Evenfall Hall had but the one hall, and really so did the Red Keep. “We shouldn’t eat where we execute people,” Jaime had said with a shrug, when asked why they needed several halls. Although so far she hadn’t witnessed any executions anywhere in Casterly Rock. The remaining outlaws had been tried and sent to the wall. Biter, probably to his great fortune, was dead in the cave. Jaime doubtlessly would have enjoyed killing him.

The trial had been uncomfortable, with the men outlining abuses by Lannister forces that made Jaime angry and occasionally defensive. He must have known some of the men who stood accused. The outlaws has explained that they had been hunting Jaime for some time, but when their attempts to kill him or capture him failed, they tried to lure him out by attacking the smallfolk. “Very Lord Tywin,” Jaime has observed. “A Lannister always pays his debts, and I will make amends for the damage by family did, but I cannot condone violence against smallfolk under any circumstances. you will spend the remainder of your lives on the Wall.”

Brienne had watched, proudly, but also a little sadly. If she were in Tarth, she would be pronouncing judgement, but here she had little power, beyond being supportive. It didn’t quite sit comfortably, even now, but it was what it was. For now.
Meanwhile, Jon had been glad of the men. Even if there was no obvious use for them at present, no one was minded to let the Wall’s defences decay again. Jon and Tormund had sent a joint best wishes through Sansa, who had relayed them with a grin, in way that made Jaime laugh and say, “well, good on them.”

Back in the banquet hall, Davos surveyed the men and women before him, and rubbed his beard. He’d gone completely grey, she noted, the last of the black in his hair and beard having faded from view. He took a deep breath. He sounded only slightly shaky as he spoke.

“It is with great honour, and humility, that I stand here today, in the shoes of two very great men, the father of the bride and the father of the groom, scions of two of our oldest, great and noblest families. I hope I can do them justice.

“Of the many assembled here, I am about the oldest…”

There were some chuckles at that. Jaime leaned over and whispered, “next would be me …” Brienne glared at him to be quiet.

“Time does not always make one wise…”, Davos continued, glaring at Jaime. “But it does offer experience. And I’ve experienced a lot. A bloody lot.”

There were some chuckles across the table at the tone, and some frowns. “We have all experienced a lot, over this past six or seven years. I pray that is has given us all wisdom. To know what we must do, and also what we must not.”

Brienne found herself nodding. Jaime reached for her hand.

“If those hard years taught us one thing, it is that a man must depend upon others. One man may plant, but another will make his plow, and a third mine the iron from which it is crafted. The man who plants will grow grain to feed himself, his neighbours, and those more distant. Others may weave or write, or yes, fight. A man lives and survives because he cooperates with others. If we do not cooperate, we become weak and poor, and so everyone suffers.

“And so it is also between our six kingdoms, and indeed between our six kingdoms and the kingdom in the North...”

He nodded to Sansa, who sat tall and proud at the head table. the Queen of the North glanced down at Tyrion to her right, and smiled, some private joke passing between them. Whatever their issue, it appeared to have been sorted out. Brienne found herself smiling, and squeezed Jaime’s hand.

“Some, I know, still harbour old grudges. Some remember and cannot forget. To you I say this. I lost my own son on the Blackwater. I lost him fighting for my king, for Stannis, a man both brilliant and flawed, but a man I loved. Those responsible for the deaths of both my son and my king are in this room. I should, by rights, hate them both.”

Brienne felt herself stiffen slightly, anxiety pooling in her stomach. She did not regret killing Stannis, but she did not want grievances aired at a wedding. Davos continued.

“Yet I have never met a smarter or hard working man than one”, he nodded at Tyrion, “or a knight more honourable than the other,” he smiled at Brienne, and she felt herself grow warm.

“Lord Tyrion and Ser Brienne are among my allies, perhaps even my friends. It would not be wrong to say that I like them.” He paused. “Well, Ser Brienne at least. And sometimes, even the other Lord Lannister is tolerable too.”
That got a laugh.

“I am a simple man, and I know that certain things cannot be forgotten, nor undone. But sometimes, even if we can’t forgive, we can rebuild trust, and move on. That is what we are doing, here today. We are moving on. Moving ahead with a new Westeros.

“And nowhere is that better shown than our bride and groom. Lord Gendry Baratheon and Lady Arya Stark.”

Cheering and clapping broke across the crowd. Brienne clapped her hand on top of Jaime’s. Someone, probably half-drunk Tyrion, made a sound something like a battle cry. Lord Baratheon was red from neck to hairline, yet still managed to look both exceedingly pleased, and like he would rather be anywhere. Arya wore a satisfied grin as she took a drink from her chalice with a smirk.

“The lad, sorry, man, before you is a Baratheon, but born a Waters. He was raised to the nobility, but he knows the ways of the smithy, the lay of the street. The blood of the stag and the dragon runs in his veins, but the blood of the common man too. He will be a Lord who speaks for all.

“The bride, Arya, is a lady of the North. A descendent of an honourable and just family, and of the first men, of a peoples that stretched back in time. And a genuine hero too.

“Wolf and stag and dragon. May this forever be the symbol of unity, of peace, of cooperation and moving on ...

Again, the crowd cheered. But Brienne didn’t listen to the rest. The baby was kicking. Nit a flutter, but a genuine, excited kick, as if he too were joining the celebration. She drew Jaime’s hand to her stomach, and he turned to her in shock, eyes glistening.

“He likes long speeches…” she whispered, with a smile.

“Gods help us. She probably takes after Tyrion.”

They locked eyes for a long moment, both thinking about things to come, but looked up at another giggle from the audience.

Whatever the joke was, they’d missed it, but there had been plenty. It had been an amusing wedding, a fun one. Now, the bride and groom were being toasted, both beaming, everyone in the hall in great spirits. A new beginning indeed.

“Lovely speech,” Jaime smirked, later, when they had been freed from the confines of arranged seating and found Davos and Tyrion sharing a jug of ale in corner. “I give the peace and happiness five years. Maybe six.”

The Onion Knight shrugged. “I’ll take what I can get. And perhaps I won’t be around when it all falls apart anyway.” Then he turned and smiled at Brienne. “My congratulations, my lady, on finding substitutes for what was meant to be your big day.”

”I do not enjoy being made a spectacle, my lord.” But she gave him a slight smile. “Or waiting.”

Jaime rolled his eyes, but his tone was fond. “She insisted we be married by the first village Septon we found. That he happened to be an illiterate yokel who smelt like a brewery was apparently irrelevant. As the man can barely read and write, his doubtlessly keeps lousy records. Fortunately, we have several witnesses to the marriage, all of whom have a terrible memory for dates.”
Tyrion laughed. “I suppose any questions over the conception of a certain cub will be dealt with my a demand to go talk to Ser Crakehall, and his greatsword.”

Jaime coughed conspiratorially, while Brienne flushed.

“Speaking of conceptions,” Jaime grinned, looking from his brother over to Queen Sansa, who was speaking with some lordling from the Reach, “I’ve done my duty to my house, when are you …”

His words were cut off as screams echoed across the hall. Years of training meant all four of them, even Tyrion, turned abruptly to the source. A gaggle of girls, and not a few women, were hoisting a scarlet-faced Gendry Baratheon above their heads, squealing with delight at the idea of stripping the strapping Lord of Storm’s End of his breeches.

“How will I ever get over missing that…” Brienne said drolly.

The men laughed.

“Don’t pretend you wouldn’t love it…” she whispered to Jaime.

They watched as a gaggle of boys hovered together, appraising Arya cautiously. She was five foot of nothing and wearing a dress, but such was her reputation as the slayer of the Night King that even arrogant young tourney champions approached with caution. Arya raised an eyebrow, daring them to try her.

‘Weddings are getting bloody dangerous,” Jaime quipped. The look from both Brienne and Davos would have frozen wildfire. “Too soon?”

Brienne punched him in the arm.

“Ow! See!”

They watched the boys fall back, or fall over, one by one, tripped or tricked in turn. Then, foes vanquished, Arya turned and headed up the stairs herself. She was only just through the door, when a patterned slipper flew back through it in her wake, landing teasingly on the mosaic floor. And then another. The cloak followed.

As with everything else, Arya did the bedding her way.

Later, Brienne and Jaime retired their chambers. Their chambers. Brienne was still getting used to that, sharing living space, openly and without shame or judgment or guilt. The babe seemed happy to be home too, wiggling within her. She sat on the bed, and put her hand back on her stomach.

“He’s kicking again,” she said, as she watched Jaime strip off his doublet, then his boots.

“Or she…” he said, voice muffled by his shirt, as he pulled that off next. "The babe is surely a she.”

A girl. The idea terrified her. She knew most men longed for sons, but Jaime at least contemplated the possibility of a daughter, and she thought there was even longing in his voice at the idea. A girl, like his beloved Myrcella. But Myrcella was as stunning as her mother, the perfect lady, and Brienne something she helped create could be like that.

“I fear a girl will not be beautiful…” she murmured, eyes on her hands, ashamed at the jealousy
and despair she felt over Jaime’s poor, dead daughter, her own demons and inadequacies.

“With me as a father? Impossible!”

She looked up, startled, to find the incongruous sight of Jaime standing before her, naked, putting himself on display in a way she would never would, not even with him. He was magnificent, all finely carved muscle and sinew. Since their first bath, their first night, he’d always been casual about his body. But he was beautiful, and she was not.

“You are so conceited.” She slapped him on his firm thigh. “But also really hard to have a serious conversation with. And with me as a mother, it is.”

He scoffed, then moved close over her, arms on either side of her body, hand and stump on the bed, trapping her. “She will have her challenges, as you did,” he kissed her cheek, and her nose. “But as with you, she will overcome them.”

His hand reached for the lacing at the back of her dress. “With you are a mother she will be strong, and brave, and good, and kind,” he whispered, lips touching the soft spot under her ear. She could feel his hot breath against her, and his smile. “And if all else fails, she’ll be bloody rich besides.”

He pulled at the strings on her dress, but they didn’t move. “What the fuck, did they *sew* you into this…?”

Brienne looked down between to her belly, still uncertain. Jaime paused, reached up, and lifted her chin with his finger.

“Brienne… Brienne, look at me.”

She did.

“Most of all, she’ll be loved.”

He kissed her gently, capturing her bottom lip for a moment, before releasing it. “I watched three children grow before my eyes, never able to touch them, or hold them. I let a fourth fall through my grasp. I vowed if I had another child, I’d hold her, and I mean that. I never intend to let this one go.” He went back to work on the laces of her dress. “By the time I am done she’ll beg you to arrange a marriage in Lys to be rid of me.” He moved his hand back behind her. “Now help me get you the fuck out of his dress…”

The longing, and love, consumed her, washing away her doubts, for now. She reached up, ran her hand up Jaime’s cheek, threaded her hands through his hair, pulled him into a kiss. His lips met her with a bruising passion and she pulled him on top of him, crushing his hand between them and making it impossible to work on the dress. In the end, he gave up, wiggled his arm free and used it to push the dress up over her waist. She raised her hips to allow her to work off her hose and small clothes, and then his fingers were on her, *in her*, teasing her, filling her ears with the divine wet sounds, and she lost herself to the sensation.

When she came down from her release, Jaime pushed her legs apart and settled himself between them with a low, relieved groan. She moaned in turn. There was nothing, nothing, like being filled by him. As he took his pleasure, he kissed the scars on her cheek, and buried his face against her torn neck. She raised her legs to pull him deeper, hands clutching at his back, and soon she cried her second release as he clutched at her hip with his good hand, thrusting wildly until he spilled into her with abandon.

Sometime later, they gave up on the laces, and simply tore the dress off.
The sun was stretching its first rays of red and pink over the horizon when Brienne woke. The room smelled of sex, of them. She flushed a little at the memory. It had been a very good night.

Instinctively, she ran her hand down her belly. The babe was sleeping. She sat up and slipped her feet over the edge of the bed and onto the discarded sheets and thickly carpeted floor. She padded to a chair and pulled on a robe. She had something she had to do.

She found the Red Woman’s amulet in the drawer of her dressing room, and picked it up with trembling fingers. The ruby was still warm in her hand, inviting and seductive. When she had first seen her torn cheek, she’d felt the urge to put it on, to see if it could smooth her skin as it had the Red Woman’s and Lady Stark’s. But it had been a silly thought, and dangerous. She had never been vain, and she had put it back. She hadn’t known quite why she had saved it, except for the lingering hope, the possibility that maybe, just maybe, there was some way it could be used to save a daughter, her daughter, from suffering what she had experienced. The teasing, the taunts. What mother would discard that possibility, that hope?

But last night had helped her come to a resolution. She didn’t need that hope. While fear was not unfounded, hiding behind a disguise was not the answer. It had taken Jaime twenty years, and near death, to learn that. She too should have realised sooner.

She glanced over at her husband. He lay sprawled across the bed, naked and glorious in the morning light. There was as much silver as gold in him now, but also more light than dark. She felt a flush of pride, for him and for them. He was a good lord, no matter how much he disliked it. He’d be a good father too, even if the experience would be touched with some sadness. Their child would be loved. Whatever came to pass, she and Jaime, and uncle Tyrion too, could help their daughter through it.

She retrieved Oathkeeper on the wall. She dropped the amulet to the ground. Then she raised Oathkeeper, and plunged it into the stone. It shattered.

There was no blue light this time, but the child in her belly rolled contentedly. "I’ll take that as a sign you’re happy with the choice", she whispered.

Jaime stirred, and then called for her.

"Brienne, it’s the crack of dawn. Come back to bed."

So she did.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who have seen this through, thank you so much for reading and commenting. Season 8 was a dumpster fire, but writing this, and Winter Falls, have helped me deal with it. Now bring on TWOW so we can all forget about the trashy show for good...
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!