To Reach For Spring

by Kadi219

Summary

Picks up near the end of 8x04 and then becomes decidedly AU. The army of the north heads for King's Landing to save the realm, rather than burn it.

Notes

This story sprang from this chapter, the scene of their goodbye and the different version that I had in my head. I couldn't accept the way it happened on screen. It just didn't ring true of either of them, and I kept imagining it differently. I know we all did, and I know there are a thousand fix-its out there, but this would not leave me alone.

When I sat down to write it, I intended only a one-shot, but the ideas just kept coming. They went decidedly AU as my imagination took off with the characters, the imagery, and entire GoT world. This is my first time writing in this fandom and genre, so I beg forgiveness for any mistakes. I have read the books as well as watched the show, so what comes in future chapters will be a mix of show and book canon as I add the things the show skipped that I both loved and felt would have made the show make much more sense. Enjoy!
He had been pensive and silent since the raven had arrived, brooding if the truth of it was known. Brienne had frowned in disapproval at the cruelty of her Lady’s words, and knew them to be at the heart of his mood. Lady Sansa was angry and worried for her brother and sister, and the army that had ridden south, and it had made her unkind. If it were anyone else but Ser Jaime, Brienne thought she might be sorry for lashing out once her anger faded, but Brienne doubted very much that Sansa would ever have a care for having wounded him with her words.

She had worried he might do something rash afterward, for Jaime was known for being impulsive, especially when it came to his family, but he had simply walked away. Now he sat in front of the fire in her chamber, brows knit together as he stared at the flames, lips turned down and unmoving. He had spoken barely a handful of words to her during dinner, although she had not blamed him for his silence.

Brienne sighed as she finished pulling off the last of her armor and leathers and put them aside. She had dismissed Podrick when he attempted to follow her after her evening watch on the walls, and was thankful now for her foresight. It was not going to be a pleasant night, and she was certain it would probably be a long one too.

She walked to the table in the corner of her room near the fire, and though she did not imbibe often, tipped the flagon of wine toward the second cup that rested beside it. She said nothing as she claimed the chair beside him and considered the contents of the cup for a moment before taking a long drink of the strong, sour liquid.

“When will you go?” She asked finally, both cursing and grateful that she knew him so well.

His gaze finally lifted from the fire and Jaime looked at her with regret and resignation. He should have known the wench would figure it out. It would not make it any easier, but at least he would be saved the displeasure of dishonoring them both by sneaking out in the night while she slept. “Sooner would be better.” It would be a long ride, and he could not delay if he had any hope of arriving in King’s Landing before the war was decided. For all they knew, it might already be too late.

Her jaw tightened for a moment and her gaze moved to the fire while she fought back the bitter rise of grief and defeat. “Would you have told me?” In truth, she wasn’t sure if she even wanted to know the answer.

“I don’t know.” The words were thick on his tongue. He watched her, the way her lips pressed into a thin line, and how rigidly she held herself for a moment, before finally her shoulders slumped and she looked at him again. He cursed himself for the sadness in her eyes, the astonishing blue sea that he oft wanted to drown in. He loved the way the colors shifted with her moods, growing as dark as the sky before dusk or shining as bright as a new steel sword beneath a clear blue sky. “I truly had not decided yet.” He shrugged a single shoulder. “I’ve never been the man you thought I was.”

She scowled at him then. “No,” she grit out, “you’ve just never believed that you are the man I know you to be.” Brienne sighed at him then. “Jaime, if you are as terrible as you think you are, then why are you waiting until our cause is all but lost to leave? You were content enough to stay until you heard that your sister might actually have a chance of winning this war. When it was certain that she would lose, you wanted no part of it. Now that she has taken one of the Dragon Queen’s closest advisors and her fleet has killed one of the queen’s dragons, weakening her considerably, you choose to ride south. If you were not the man I know you are, how is it that I know your intent?”
“Because even you must know that I always go back to her in the end.” He could not stand her unflagging belief in him, not when he was about to leave her. Jaime pushed up from the chair to stalk around the confines of the small chamber. He had slept in that room every night since the first time he had come to her door, drunk on wine and their victory against death, and wanting to believe that he was better than he was. He fooled himself into thinking he could be happy, and truly she was the one bright thing in the gray waste that was the north, but it was not where he belonged.

“Oh yes, I know,” she rolled her eyes at him. Her lip curled in distaste. “What was there for you in King’s Landing if Daenerys had won. Now that she is more likely to lose, it would be safe for you to return to your sister’s side. Surely that is where you belong and where you always want to be.” Her gaze followed his almost manic pacing. “Leave if you must, but do not mock me, or lie to me, not tonight.” Brienne placed the cup back on the table before leaning forward in her chair. “The Dragon Queen is wounded, and even before she left Winterfell she was showing signs of strain. She has lost Ser Jorah, to whom she was very close, and much of her army in the fight against the Night King. The Dothraki were blood of her blood and most of them burned on the funeral pyres, those whose bodies we were able to recover at least. Now she’s lost Missandei, for surely your sister will execute her, and one of the creatures she calls her children. The Starks and their northmen do not trust her, and it was only for Jon Snow that they follow her now, the man she followed north, whom grows more distant from her by the day.” When he stopped pacing to glare at her, Brienne simply shrugged. “Cersei will never surrender, and between the two of them, they are more like to burn King’s Landing to the ground. Neither of them will care for the smallfolk, and both are so intent on ruling that it will matter not if they are only ruling a pile of ashes. You have never treated me as if you believed I was dimwitted, do not begin to do so now.”

“Why must you always believe that I am more than I am?” The strength went out of his legs and he sat on the edge of the bed. His head bowed, while shame drew his shoulders into a slump. “I laid with my own sister. I pushed a boy of barely ten years out a window to save the children we made, and crippled him for life. Everything I have ever done has been for her.”

“Everything?” She stared at the top of his bent head and slowly shook her own, although he did not see it. “You traded your honor to save a city of half a million people, without thought of your sister. You rode to war to save your brother, and stayed at war because your father commanded it, not because your sister was warming your tent, but so that you might finally win his approval. You are not stupid, though you often act it, and had you had any intent of winning that war you would not have allowed yourself to be captured by Robb Stark’s forces. Though I will grant, you tried very hard to escape more than once.” When he finally looked up at her, irritation at what he oft called her stubbornness glinting in his green eyes, she only quirked a brow at him. “I do not recall Cersei being in the woods with us when you lied to Hoat’s men to save my virtue, nor do I recall her being there to care for you when you almost died after Hoat took your hand because he could not have my body for his men’s entertainment. Was it your sister you confessed your deepest secrets to in the baths at Harrenhal? It was some time ago, but I seem to remember only the two of us sharing that tub. Nor do I recall your dear, sweet Cersei being the reason you jumped in front of a bear, without a weapon, barely recovered from the fever that almost took you, and only a single hand to show for our time in the Riverlands.”

“Do not,” he growled at her, muscles bunching as though he might leap at her, much as he had the bear.

“Do not what? Do not remind you how it is that I came to see the honor in you?” Brienne scoffed at him, and then she rose finally. She towered over him for just a moment before finally sinking to her knees in front of him, forcing him to meet her gaze when he would not. “You pushed a boy out of a window to save your children, and still they died. The man I met in the Riverlands was an annoying ass, who spoke too much and too arrogantly, and thought too much of his name. There was already
an air of regret about you, though I did not recognize it until later. You’re right, the man you were before you pushed Bran Stark from that window would not be sitting here now, because he would never have given me a second thought, and he certainly wouldn’t have bothered to save me from Hoat and his men, never mind that bloody bear. You’re not that man anymore, you’ve changed; we all have. That is the way of war and loss, and all the things we cannot fight or avoid.” She laid a hand against the side of his face and was grateful when he did not flinch away, despite the pain in his eyes. “The man that pushed Bran would not have ridden north, alone, without an army, for the sake of only fulfilling an oath,” she said more gently, “but the man that killed Aerys would have. You didn’t trade your honor to save the city, Jaime, it was always there… you only needed to find it again.”

For a moment he was tempted to turn his face into her hand, let his lips move against her calloused palm and fingers, but he was lost in her gaze. It was the way she looked at him, the way that she always looked at him. “I didn’t find it,” he said, voice rasping with emotion, “you did.”

“And you always give me more credit than is deserved.” The thickness of his beard tickled against the pad of her thumb as she stroked the line of his jaw. He was not so much a golden lion anymore. The years and wars had not been kind, but he was still beautiful to her, he always had been. “Jaime.”

It was the low, pained keening sound of his name that finally made him move. He rested his forehead against hers and shuddered. “I don’t want to go.” That was the truth of it, the truth he had been struggling with since Sansa Stark had so spitefully expressed her displeasure at missing the possibility of watching his sister’s execution.

“But you will.” His hand was in her hair, fingers curling through the short locks. She had thought if he touched her that she would never be able to let him go, but now she found herself unable to move away from him again. “She is still your sister,” she said quietly, “and you love her.” It hurt her to admit it, but she had never shied from the truth.

“She will burn that city to the ground, and that thrice damned throne with it, before she gives it up.” He clenched his eyes tightly closed, his nose moved against her cheek. She smelt of ice and smoke, and the oil she used to clean her sword, and something else, something sweeter though he could not put a name to it. She smelt of home and he was loath to leave it when he’d finally found it, but if his sister won there would be no place in this world that would ever be safe for Brienne or the Stark children she would protect until her last breath.

Which she he was talking about could be left for debate, but Brienne knew it was his sister that was darkening his thoughts and drawing him away from her. She had always known that it would be Cersei that took him from her in the end, in one way or another. He would never forgive himself if he didn’t try, and she would never be able to live with that kind of regret, or the resentment that might grow from it. These things had a way of festering, she knew. “I would go with you if I could, but my place is here.” She had sworn an oath, and she could not walk away from it, no matter how painful it might be to let him go.

“I know.” He had counted on that, on her honor keeping her safe even if he couldn’t. If she were anyone else she would have insisted on joining him, and whether he was truly the stupidest Lannister or not, Jaime knew that Cersei would kill her for her own sport. She did not take losing well, and he might have stayed with her out of some misguided sense of obligation, but he had not been hers for quite some time. “I should go tonight, before Lady Sansa decides I needs be watched. I would so hate to disappoint her,” he said, and for once let the bitterness leak into his tone.

She huffed in disapproval, but did not disagree with him. “It will be easier to get you out of Winterfell under the cover of darkness.” They had both taken turns on the walls at night; they knew
when the watch would change. He would leave before then, at the hour of the wolf, when the first watch had grown tired and was less likely to notice a lone rider leaving in the night.

“I think I’ve been a bad influence on you,” he quipped, though there was little joy in it, “plotting against your Lady and her forces such as this. Who knew it would take so many years to finally bend the great and honorable Maid of Tarth.”

Brienne snorted at him then. “If she were still a Maid, perhaps.” The corners of her mouth twisted toward a wry smile. They would say he had taken that too, and left her less than what she was, but she had rarely cared what others thought of her. He lifted his head, and for a moment she was afraid to meet his gaze, worried that she might see regret there. Instead, there was pride in his pained eyes, and the beginnings of a smirk. Any other night she would have rolled her eyes at him and pushed him away, remarked at his arrogance, but tonight she kissed him. She let him draw her onto the thin straw mattress and lay her back, and when she tasted salt on his lips, she couldn’t be certain if it was from his tears or hers.

It was not until later, when he was buried deep inside her, and those impossibly long legs were wrapped around him for the last time that he looked into those eyes and said words he hadn’t thought she would believe before. “It’s you I love. It’s been you for quite some time.”

She pulled his mouth back to her again and spoke against his lips. “I know.” He surely must, for she knew the image in her looking glass well, and there was no other reason he would be there, with her, when he could be anywhere else. He knew her heart, she had never been able to hide it, not from him, nor the Starks, or the Dragon Queen, or even his sister. He would take a piece of her with him when he went, but she had always known she had never been meant to have him.

He had hoped his last memory of her would be of her in their bed, but that wasn’t her way. The woman she was would not remain wrapped in her furs while he rode away from her. It was not a woman of songs or softness that had claimed his heart. She was a warrior, and much too strong to hide away from their shared pain. She went with him instead, helped him tie his packs to the horse they saddled together.

When it was finally time for him to go, he looked at her, not with regret, but with longing. He wanted to stay, but the north had never been his place, and he had known he would never be allowed to keep her. “As difficult as it was to watch you leave, both times, I never realized the leaving was even harder,” he told her.

“Almost impossible,” she admitted. It had pained her to leave him each of those times, but it seemed that her place had always been elsewhere.

“Almost.” He very nearly smiled, because her oaths and duty would always come first. It made her who she was, and it was why he had tried so hard to be better than he was, to deserve her… but he never would, he knew it, even if she wouldn’t believe it. She was stubborn as an aurochs, but that was one of many things he loved about her. His arm moved around her waist and he drew her near. A lesser man might feel inadequate next to her, but he admired her strength, he counted on it. She was tall, and strong, and would survive them all… as long as the Starks didn’t do something foolish that would get her killed. Lady Sansa was not keen to leave her castle again, and for that he was thankful. She would keep Brienne close, now that most of her forces had marched south with Jon Snow. “If I don’t get there in time,” he said quietly, and though she stiffened against him, she did not look away, “and Cersei does manage to win, take Sansa and go north of the wall. She will be safe with the free folk, and so will you.”

“She won’t leave.” Brienne shook her head. She was touched at his concern for their safety, her safety, but she was quite capable of looking out for herself. “You know she won’t. There must
always be a Stark in Winterfell. Sansa will not give up her home again."

“Then she will die for it,” Jaime sighed. “Cersei will never allow the Starks to survive, you know that. You know that better than almost anyone. She will send an army, and if she has no army, she will send assassins.”

“You let me worry about Sansa Stark and her family.” She settled a hand against his shoulder, while the other cupped the back of his neck, with her fingers curling in the hair that brushed against the collar of his leather jerkin. “We will be safe enough, regardless of who wins this war, that I can promise you.” If there were danger, Bran would see it coming, long before it reached them.

“So you’ll stay safe and make my leaving easy—”

She kissed him instead. There was no oath that she could swear to that end that she would ever be able to keep. Long moments passed and in the end, when she was tempted to ask him to stay, she stepped away from him. “Go, before the watch changes and you’re found.”

There was much he wanted to say, but he turned to his horse and pulled himself into the saddle. The longer he delayed, the harder it became. He didn’t look at her as he turned his mount away and rode toward the open gates. As he passed beneath the arch, Jaime drew the horse to a stop and both beast and man turned. The animal pranced beneath him, but he decided that he wanted his last sight of her to be the image of her standing tall and proud in her leather and furs, hair pale in the moonlight and skin glowing in the light of the torches that lit the courtyard. His lip curled in what might have been a smile or a grimace, and then he clenched his jaw tight and gave the horse beneath him another strong kick that sent it cantering away, away from Winterfell, away from Brienne, and away from any hope he’d ever had of being a better man.

When finally she left the courtyard behind, Brienne was not surprised to find Bran Stark waiting just outside the great hall near the stairs that would take her back to her chambers. His stare was as disconcerting as ever, but she wondered why, if he had known Jaime was leaving, he just let him go. Her eyes narrowed a bit, in speculation. “You knew he would go.”

It was more statement than question. Bran’s head inclined. “I knew it was one possibility.” He regarded her without emotion. “He told you what happened… in the tower.”

“He did.” Her brows drew together. “Why didn’t you? It would have been all the evidence your sister needed to get rid of him. The Dragon Queen would have even appreciated it.”

“He had a part to play.” Bran simply blinked at her. “He still does. As do you, as do we all.” For once, he allowed the part of him that was still Brandon Stark to float a little closer to the surface of the being that he was now and acknowledge that his cryptic responses were less than kind, especially when he considered the parting she had just endured. “The Night King was not the only one threatening to destroy us all. The realm still sits on the knife’s edge of survival. The city will most assuredly burn; he cannot stop it. That is beyond all of us now. Either Cersei will burn it, or Daenerys will, but if he can stop just one of them, there may be a chance for the rest of us.”

“If the Dragon Queen wins, how safe will you and your sisters be? Lady Sansa will not easily bend the knee.” She had fought too hard to win her independence, and Brienne feared that she would rather die than lose it again.

“The future is unclear. I see what was and what is, but of what will be… there are only glimpses, possibilities.” It was hard to explain the flashes he saw. Some of them happened, many others did not. One choice created ripples, and sometimes those ripples had the ability to change many things, however small or large the choice might be.
“Yet you knew that he would leave.” Brienne arched a brow at him. “What other choice was there?” She wasn’t certain that she wanted to know. It might be more painful than what was.

“There wasn’t,” he told her. “He was always going to go. Though the manner of his leaving did vary,” he admitted, somewhat curious at the things he had seen. This was one of the better ones. It gave him hope for the other possible outcomes. Bran saw that his response had wounded her, though, and that was not his intent. He did not feel much, but she had protected his family, and would continue to do so, and for that he went on to explain. “I saw him, the night he killed the Mad King. He was the youngest Kingsguard in an age. He did what others would not. So yes, I knew that he would go.”

“He doesn’t see it.” It still bothered her that Jaime would always deny the honor and strength she saw in him. It probably always would. Brienne sighed. “And he calls me stubborn,” she muttered.

“No, he doesn’t,” Bran agreed. “He went away, inside, as he once told you to do, for a very long time. Then one day he pushed a boy out of a tower window, and he realized he had become worse than the monster he killed. We all have parts to play, and even when we try to walk away from them, the world has ways of making certain we are where we need to be, when we need to be. He had to push me from the tower, so that I could become what I am, so that he would be in the Riverlands, so that you would take him back to King’s Landing. He had to return to Harrenhal to save you, so that later you would be there to save Sansa, and take her to Jon so that they could take back our home. Our mother’s uncle, the Blackfish, was never going to leave Riverrun, but Sansa had to send you south again, so that Ser Jaime could be reminded that there are better ways to achieve what seems impossible. I know what needed to happen to bring us where we are today, because it has already happened and I can see it. It is what is to come that is more difficult.”

Brienne frowned. “It always is.” It was a bit comforting that Bran could no more see the future than the rest of them. That made things both easier and harder, just as the future had always been for many of them. “If you will excuse me, my lord, it has been a long and trying evening, and your sister will expect me by her side quite early.”

He had stopped reminding people that he was not a lord. For as long as he wore Bran Stark’s face, they would address him as such. “Of course.” He watched her go from the corner of his eye before his mind turned toward other things. He may not be able to clearly see what was to come, but there was still much happening in the world, particularly the world south of them.

-TBC-
Jaime discovered, after only a few days, that the ride south was much easier than his trip north had been. At least this time he was less worried that he would be intercepted and captured. He was in a hurry, but he didn’t have to ride as though the Stranger were on his heels. He slept, when he must, but had found it easier to ride through the night as long as there was the moon to light his way, and when his body was not so fatigued that he could no longer remain in his saddle. Sleep had not come easy unless he was so exhausted he could not ignore it. When he closed his eyes he would dream of her, both of them, really; one golden and cruel, and the other the truest knight he had ever known.

He tried to remember the girl he once loved, the one who grew to be heralded as the most beautiful woman in all of Westeros. Instead, he had only been able to recall the bitter triumph in her eyes after she destroyed the Sept of Baelor and promised to crush her enemies beneath her heel.

Lady Olenna was right, and she was also wrong. He didn’t stay with Cersei out of blind devotion or love, he had hoped to be able to curb the worst of her impulses, but she was a disease and he regretted his part in the spread of her. He should have stopped her after the Sept, and wished now that he had not let his grief for Tommen stay his hand. She was all that was left of a time of golden lions, and he let himself cling to her. It was his weakness and stupidity that had brought them to this. He was never blind to his faults; he had only chosen to ignore them.

Jaime would rather not think of Cersei at all, despite the fact that he was riding toward her. He preferred the nights when he dreamed of the other. Every time he woke was more painful than the last, but at least in dreams of Brienne there was warmth, and light, and love. He could almost fool himself into believing there might be an afterwards, that he would see her again.

When he reached the Riverlands Jaime allowed himself to remember his days as her captive. In his mind he was not chained, and as he had been many times, he was warmed by the memory that she was his last sparring partner when he was still the Golden Lion. There were many times when he wondered what might have been if he had listened to his father, left the Kingsguard and taken his place as the Lord of Casterly Rock. He wants to believe that she would have married him, had he asked, even if she might have laughed in his face or believed he was mocking her. Those thoughts warm him too, but reality is cold and cruel, and harder and more unforgiving than the ground he has been sleeping on.

Jaime decided to stay at an inn when he reached Rosby. He could have ridden on, attempted to sneak past the Dragon Queen’s armies and gain access to King’s Landing, but he was tired and cold, and his stump had been throbbing with a keen ache since he passed Harrenhal. He dreamt again that night, but it was of neither Cersei nor Brienne.

He had not gone back to the tower while he was at Winterfell, his shame would not allow it, but in sleep he found himself there anyway. It is as he remembered it, because Lannister or no, he had never forgotten that day. He was surprised, however, to find Bran there, and was left wondering at the soundness of his own mind to see the boy seated in the window, leaning against the ledge with his small, unbroken legs crossed. The eyes watching him, however, are not those of the boy he pushed, but of the Three-eyed Raven.

“If I could truly go back,” Jaime said, “I wouldn’t do it again.”
“Yes you would.” There was no judgment in Bran’s voice. It was as even and emotionless as it had been at Winterfell, and oddly, it was the voice of the man and not the boy. “If you thought you could save them, could have them all back, you would do it again. Not only Tommen and Myrcella, but your father, and uncle, and cousin, and even Cersei before the madness took her. If you could change it all, keep them all safe, even Joffrey, you would still push me from this tower.” At the shame in the other man’s eyes, Bran shrugged. “I might do it too, if I thought it would bring back my Father, Mother, Robb, and Rickon. If I thought Sansa could be as she was, when she still believed in songs and princes, and Arya had never looked at death as a friend. If I thought it would reset everything, bring back Hodor and Jojen, and take the regret from Meera’s eyes, I might push me too.”

“No.” Jamie shook his head as he walked across the dusty, sunlit room. He leaned against the ledge of the window, opposite the boy and smiled sadly at him. “You wouldn’t. There is too much of your father in you, and Ned Stark was always too damned honorable for his own good.” It was not a dream, he realized, Bran was truly here, speaking to him while he slept. While part of him found that damned disturbing, there was another part that figured it was par for the course of his life now.

“But I am also my mother,” Bran reminded him. “There was a part of her that understood what you did, though it horrified her. It was the part of her that was always angry and cruel to Jon, simply because he existed, a bastard boy who wanted nothing more than to belong.” He inclined his head, and wondered that Jaime had not noticed that he was whole. He appeared as he had that day, the proud lion, strong and tall, but there was a sense of regret about him, instead of arrogance and pride. “He was never a bastard, you know. There is a part of your Prince that still lives. You did not fail, and neither did Rhaegar, nor Ser Arthur.” Bran knew that was part of what made him the bitter man he became, that his heroes had failed him. He wondered who Jaime might have been if he had known the truth of it. “My Aunt Lyanna went with him because she loved him. Robert’s rebellion was a lie.”

Jaime grew stiff, for just a moment, and then he grimaced and looked beyond the tower, over the rooftops of Winterfell. “Of course it was,” he sighed. “Most wars are started for lies. And Jon?”

“Aegon Targaryen,” Bran told him. “Born of my aunt and the Prince. They were married. By the time he was born and Rhaegar had died, word had already reached the Tower of Joy that Elia and her children were dead. She named him for his brother.” Bran shrugged at the disbelief in Jaime’s eyes. “She was dying and fevered, it probably seemed a good idea at the time. Your Prince loved her, and Ser Arthur was protecting his Queen.”

“And his King,” he said quietly, “or so it seems. Seven hells,” he muttered. “If Daenerys ever finds out…”

“She knows.” Bran shrugged again. “As you said, Ned Stark was always more honorable than was good for him. Jon has always been more like father than the rest of us. Funny, isn’t it, when he isn’t even truly our brother.”

“You bloody Starks, and your bloody honor!” Jaime pushed away from the window to stalk the width of the room. “She’ll kill him, you know that don’t you? Does he? Or is he just as blind and foolish as your father was. By the gods… bloody northern fools!” He shook his head. “What does he think she will do? Allow him to rule beside her? It’s gone too far for that. She will do what she can to protect her claim to that throne, his bloody mad Targaryen Queen. Then what becomes of the rest of his family, you, his sister…” Brienne. He thought she would be safe in the North, at Winterfell, with Sansa and the other Starks. Once again, he was wrong, and it was too late to fix it.

“I don’t know.” That is the truth of it. “I cannot see the future. The part of me that is still Brandon
Stark wants to believe that his brother will protect his family. I cannot be certain of that. All I can see are possibilities. In most of them, you did not stop. You rode straight for the Capitol, and were captured on the way. This is the only one where you decided to rest. That is why I am here. If I still felt humor, it might be funny to know that you are all that stands between Bran’s family and those that might still destroy them.”

Jaime snorted then. “If I am the best you have, then we’re all f*cked. I hope you know that.” His shoulders slumped, and with them, the rest of the fight went out of his body. He leaned against one of the stone walls and let himself slide to the floor. He stared across the room at Bran and shook his head. “Why me?”

“Because you know what it is to lose everything and still think there might be hope. A fool’s thoughts, perhaps,” Bran shrugged, “but it might be enough to save us. I can’t promise you will survive the attempt.” He looked at him, and decided there was more that he should know, if he was going to put himself between life and destruction. “Tyrion killed your father, but if he hadn’t, Cersei would have. He would have eventually gotten in her way. She doesn’t like it when people are in her way. She never has. There was a girl in the west that you might have married if you had not joined the Kingsguard. Cersei got rid of her and made sure you took those oaths. She was never what you wanted her to be. It was not your father that ordered Ser Gregor to kill Elia Martell and Prince Rhaegar’s children.”

“Gregor was my father’s dog, the entire realm knew that.” He shook his head, unwilling to believe it. “He may not have ordered them slaughtered, but Gregor did my father’s bidding.”

“Tywin was not the only one who held the dog’s leash,” Bran reminded him. “He was ruthless and unforgiving, but there was still a part of Tywin that was beholden to Joanna, and your mother was close to Elia’s. She and her brother would have fostered at Casterly Rock, had your mother lived. You might have married Elia instead of Rhaegar, but we shall never know. That was only one possibility that did not come to be. What I do know is that Cersei does not like to lose and she intended to have Rhaegar. In losing him, she lost the crown, and she lost you, at least for a time. There was no one at Casterly Rock to do her bidding while you were in King’s Landing serving Aerys. Instead, after Rhaegar fell, Cersei decided that she would have whoever took the crown, but those children would be in her way. Your father would have kept them alive, and Elia with them. He planned to send them to the Rock, to have as bargaining tools against Robert. He always expected it would be Robert that took the crown; after all, it was his rebellion that started it all. Tywin wanted to be able to control him, better than he had Aerys, and in the event that he was wrong, that it was Ned Stark they put on the throne, he knew he would never be able to convince the honorable northman to put aside his new Tully bride. He imagined that having Elia and her children would have made it easier to secure his place as Hand of the King, even with Ned. Your sister always thought herself more like your father than any of the rest of you, but she was never as clever as she wanted to believe. She always lacked foresight. That has been her downfall, as much as her need for vengeance and her descent into madness have been.”

It was one more blow, upon too many. Jaime looked away. His eyes were clenched tightly closed. “They were children, a threat to no one. Rhaenys only wanted her kitten, and Aegon was but a babe. Elia cared not for power or who sat the throne. She’d have happily taken her children and gone back to Dorne with them, had anyone allowed it.” He tipped his head back against the stones and stared at the rafters above them. “Why is it only the good and gentle that do not survive this world? How is it that the rest of us are allowed to survive, just to plunder it into ruin.”

“Power corrupts and men are weak.” Bran tilted his head. “We cannot all be Brienne the Beauty.” He watched the other man sigh while his face settled into an expression that was wistful and creased with longing.
“No, I don’t suppose we can.” With his eyes closed, Jaime can see her as she was the night he left, proud and strong. There was no mocking in Bran’s tone, but few saw her as he did, or know that beauty can be deceptive and she was better than all of them for all that many considered her to be plain.

“Love is the death of duty,” Bran said. “That is what Maester Aemon once told Jon, while he was still at Castle Black. I’m not sure that I believe it.”

“He could be right,” Jaime shrugged. “The things I’ve done for love…” He waved a hand, his right, at where Bran sat in the window. “They were all quite abysmal, really.”

“Not all of them.” Bran folded his hands in his lap and turned, so that his legs were dangling inside the window. “You sent Ser Brienne away from King’s Landing because you were afraid for her. You cared, even if you didn’t fully understand it at the time. If you hadn’t done that, she wouldn’t have saved Sansa. Many things might not have happened, but that is certainly one of them. Failing, again, to protect someone she was sworn to would have destroyed her. You know that.”

“I do.” Jaime admitted. He couldn’t imagine how terrible that might have been, but he was sure that the boy was right. “There’s a tender heart buried underneath all that honor and stubbornness. If I hadn’t sent her away, Cersei would have had her killed. My brother was right,” he sighed. “I always saw my sister for exactly what she was, and I loved her anyway. I wonder does that make me the bigger monster?”

“Only if love is wrong. I’m not sure that it is. I think it is what we do with it that makes it wrong.”

“Like pushing boys out of windows,” he remarked.

“Or saving a friend from a bear.” Bran shrugged. “But what do I know of love? I’m a raven, not a boy, or a man.”

“You may not give yourself enough credit,” Jaime decided. “What would you have me do?” He had grown weary of their conversation. “I can’t change the past, and I don’t see how one man with one hand can save the future. Even if I can convince Cersei to surrender the city, if Daenerys is her father’s daughter, if she chooses madness, we’re all lost anyway.”

“Maybe. That is one path,” Bran admitted. “But even if you survive, could you live with yourself if you did not try? There are only three people alive who know the truth of Aerys. A raven, a man, and the woman he would die for. It was wise; to keep the wildfire hidden, trying to remove it or destroy it would have brought attention to it. Neither Tywin nor Robert had any business with that kind of power at their fingertips. If Cersei does not use it now, Drogon’s flames will cause it to erupt just the same. The city will burn. Jon will listen, if you tell him. There is enough of Rhaegar in him that he will hear the truth in your words and ignore the part of him that is Ned Stark and would turn you away. You will need his help to keep Daenerys from using her last dragon, and Davos can get you into the city. There are others that would help you too, if you let them.” His dark eyes bore into the other man. “Ser Davos can get you into the city without being seen by the Gold Cloaks or your Lannister army. Sandor Clegane intends to kill his brother, and if you cannot convince your sister to surrender, then mine will end her madness. She is the last name on Arya’s list. I ask only that if it comes to that, you protect her. There is only death to end vengeance, and Arya’s need to avenge our family has kept her alive this long, but once she’s finished her list, I fear what might become of her. You swore an oath the Catelyn Stark, and there is still a chance for you to fulfill that oath.”

“And if we fail?” he asked quietly. It was too much, this burden of guilt and duty that Bran was laying at his feet, but he supposed that was his penance. He had pushed the boy from the window, and maybe he had a part to play and it was necessary for Bran to become what he was, but that did
not change his regret or remove his shame. “What then, Raven, what would you have us do?”

“I do not know. We will have to see.” He tilted his head and considered. “Remind Jon that love is the death of duty, and that he is the shield that guards the realms of men.” His lips twitched toward a near smile. “I will tell Ser Brienne that we have spoken and that you are well, and that you are still fulfilling your oath to my mother.” He paused for a moment before adding, “and to your Prince.”

“And to my Prince,” Jaime agreed. His mouth twisted into a half grin. For just a moment he was truly the Lion of Lannister again. “You’re wrong, you know. If I could go back to this day, I wouldn’t do it again. I’d have listened to my first instinct and found another way.”

For a moment the Raven was the boy again. He smiled. “I know. That’s why it must be you.” His eyes glinted deviously, and then he threw himself backward.

Jaime started, almost leapt to stop him, before he remembered that it was only a dream. A raven’s call sounded a moment later and a large black bird rose from where the boy had dropped. As it flew away he laughed. The sound of it, ringing off the stone walls of the tower, was still in his ears when his eyes opened and he found himself back at the inn in Rosby. Jaime rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. If he lived, he might just get the Baratheon boy, Gendry, to melt down his golden hand and remake it in the image of a Raven in flight. He would present it to Bran; Jaime thought that might amuse him. Perhaps he would leave instructions for Gendry to do it anyway. He was a Lannister after all, and he still had a debt to try to pay.

It was past time he started.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

They don’t really go into it on the show, actually I don't think they go into it at all because it's mostly Tywin's sister Genna, in the books, who describes his personality as a younger man and his great love for his wife Joanna. I’ve always had a hard time reconciling that Tywin, as cold & ruthless as he was, would defy the memory of his beloved wife to have a woman he knew she was close to killed by Ser Gregor. It just doesn't work in my head, so my imagination found a way to make it work for me, and I hope it's not too far out in left field... but we know in both canons that Tywin knew the value of a good hostage, and we know how much Cersei loathes the idea of losing, and how terrible she is at thinking through consequences... and so my brain filled in the rest.

As to Bran... well, I intend to make more use of him than they did during the final season. I was so stoked for the Jamie & Bran reunion and then... there just wasn't enough. There just wasn't enough of everyone, IMHO.

There are several chapters of this already written... I will post them as they are edited, at least one per week. For everyone already reading, thank you! :)
Jaime’s original plan had called for him to attempt to sneak past the northern armies and make his way into the city. As he approached the tent city they had erected the next day, he realized just how foolish that attempt might have been. The northern forces, along with what remained of the Dothraki and Unsullied, were spread out for almost a league in each direction, and patrolling even further as they waited for the decision to march on the city. He would have been captured in the attempt, he realized, and likely branded as a traitor.

Instead of trying to ride around the army, he rode into the middle of it, his mount plodding along the muddied ground as he moved closer to the gray and white banners of House Stark. He wasn’t stopped until after he had dismounted and attempted to enter the large gray tent at the center of the camp. Jaime wasn’t sure if he was more appalled by the northerners’ arrogance or lack of suspicion. He might have fought with them against the Army of the Dead, but he was still a Lannister for crying out loud, a lion among wolves. Robb Stark would never have allowed him to ride into the center of his camp so easily, but Jon Snow was not the Young Wolf.

“I’ve come to see the King in the North,” he told the Stark guards. “Tell him his brother sent me.”

They didn’t seem inclined to agree, but there was at least enough mystery and respect surrounding Bran Stark for them to understand he would know if they did not do his bidding. “That will fine, lads, let him in.”

Jaime was not surprised to find Ser Davos staying close to his king, and was thankful for it. More than once the older man had proved to be a voice of reason while they were still in the north. Once he had stepped into the tent, Jaime took a moment to look around. There were a few others present that he didn’t recognize, but thankfully none of them were the Queen’s men. He waited until the guards had left them before nodding to the two men. “Lord Snow, Ser Davos.”

It was Jon that looked at him with suspicion and distrust. He nodded to the other northern lords and dismissed them. “That will be all, thank you.” He waited for them to go before turning his attention onto the older knight. “You said my brother sent you. Why didn’t Bran send a raven? He has ways of ensuring it would make it to me. Why did he send you?”

Jaime squinted at him. He could almost see a bit of Rhaegar in him. It was something in the eyes, he thought, and maybe the curve of his jaw. Otherwise, he couldn’t imagine the boy as anything but Ned Stark’s bastard son. He certainly had the look of him, especially now with that disapproving scowl. “The Raven has a way of reminding men of things they’d like to forget. He asked my assistance in return for a debt that I owe him.” Jaime shrugged and moved further into the tent. “There’s wildfire hidden in caches around the city,” he began, deciding to get right to the heart of it. Talking around it wasn’t going to make it an easier to reveal that part of his past. “I’m not sure how much of it is left. A good bit of it was used during the Battle of the Blackwater, but I can’t be certain how much of that came from the old stores. Cersei set off a good bit when she destroyed the Sept of Baelor, but Aerys had dozens of stockpiles hidden.” A muscle in his jaw ticked, at least Snow had the grace to look stricken at his revelation, Davos too, but Jaime knew that Davos had seen what wildfire could do up close, and his support of Stannis had cost him a son in that battle. Jaime scratched at his beard. It needed a good trimming, but there was no time for that now. “Ned Stark and Robert Baratheon believed I killed the Mad King on my father’s order. The truth is I begged him to bar the gates to my father and his army. I knew we were losing the war, and my father never picks
a losing side. Aerys would have leveled the city rather than hand it over to his enemies, I killed him to prevent that, and I let Ned and Robert go on believing what they wanted, because it suited my purpose to do so. That much wildfire in the hands of my father, or Robert for that matter, would have been a disaster.”

Jon moved to a chair and dropped into it, his face pale beneath his dark beard. “By the gods,” he muttered. Was there no end to it all? How could he make anyone understand how dangerous their campaign had just become? Daenerys would never listen to him; she was driven by hate and vengeance now. “Did Lord Varys know? Or your brother?”

He glanced at Davos, who looked just as stricken as the younger man, before shaking his head. “I can’t be certain. I never told Tyrion about it, and Varys never said anything to me. If the Spider knows, he’s kept that secret well. We’ll have to ask him.”

“It’s a bit late for that.” Davos scrubbed a hand over his face.

Jaime looked between the two men, saw the glance they shared and narrowed his eyes at the guilt that passed between them. He straightened a bit more. “What did she do?”

If Jon minded his tone, he didn’t show it. He nodded at Davos and looked away, unwilling to speak the words himself. “Lord Varys was executed, for treason,” Davos explained. “He was caught conspiring against her grace… spreading lies.”

His hesitation told Jaime all he needed to know. His teeth ground together. “Telling the truth more like.” His gaze dropped to Jon and he stared hard at the young man. “It’s lucky I’ve had it directly from your brother, or I might believe the story she has you telling everyone. If it were anyone but Bran, I’d have laughed in their face. You don’t look a thing like Rhaegar, and Lyanna would never have been cowed by anyone, certainly not one such as Daenerys Targaryen. The brooding…” he snorted, “you’ve got that down well enough, I suppose. Rhaegar could brood better than most, usually because of his father’s actions.”

Jon scowled at him for a moment, and then shook his head and sighed. “It never occurred to me that you would know them.” There was a part of him, the boy that had always longed to know his mother that wanted to ask after both his parents. There was no time for that now, however, and he didn’t know if there ever would be again.

“He was my Prince,” Jaime said quietly, “of course I knew him. I only met your mother once, but she left an impression.” He snorted softly. “Your sister Arya is a bit like her, Sansa too, if I’m honest about it.” He frowned as his gaze drifted. “I imagine Brienne might have been a bit like Lyanna, if she’d had a different life.” A kinder one, he imagined, filled with more people who could see her as he did, where she hadn’t needed to ride to war to prove herself worthy. Jaime shook his head. “That’s part of the reason I’m here, actually. Your brother reminded me that some oaths are for life, regardless of the whims of others. A knight is sworn to protect the innocent, the kingsguard are sworn to protect their king, and the royal family. Both vows are for life.” He shrugged. “I suppose that means I’m sworn to you now.”

“If it’s all the same,” Jon grimaced, “I’d rather you weren’t.” That was the last thing he needed right now. “Our queen hasn’t forgotten that you killed her father.” He pushed himself out of the chair and squared his shoulders. “You fought for us at Winterfell, and I won’t forget that, and if you’d like to help protect the city, I’ll allow it… but Daenerys isn’t like to forget—”

“She’s not my queen,” Jaime reminded him. “Rhaella was,” he said, when the other man’s eyes narrowed. “Elia and Rhaenys didn’t live long enough to bear the title, but once Aerys was dead, and although Rhaegar had fallen, your mother became my queen. Even if I didn’t know it at the time.
You don’t want to rule, and I can respect that, it was never a burden I wanted either. That doesn’t change what is.” Jaime took another step forward. “Bran had a message for you. You are the shield that guards the realms of men. You can’t change it, and you can’t escape it. You swore an oath to protect this world, even if it means protecting it from the woman you love.” His eyes softened and his voice dropped. “A fact I understand all too well. You want to look beyond the madness to the girl she was, but if Varys is dead, then she burned him, just as she burned the Tarlys, and much of my army. They were all good men, loyal to the realm, and whose only crime was opposing Daenerys Targaryen.” His gaze dropped to the rug-covered planks beneath their feet. “Before the end, Aerys saw enemies in every shadow, heard betrayal in every whisper. He burned those he believed disloyal, and it had the effect he wanted. People across the realm were afraid of him. Five hundred men stood and watched your grandfather and uncle burn, and not a one of them did a thing. Not a one of my White Brothers stepped forward to stop that madness, and it was madness. For what crime? Wanting their daughter and sister back? They could have hunted Rhaegar and Lyanna down, exacted their vengeance and taken her back by force, but they sought their King’s grace instead. What is more loyal than that? But Aerys took offense at their anger at his heir and chose to act accordingly.”

“She isn’t like her father,” Jon’s throat was thick, aching with emotion. Even he didn’t believe his words. He wanted to; gods how he wanted to think he could still save her. He’d seen it in her eyes, though, the madness that Ser Jaime spoke of. “Even Tyrion doesn’t think so. She’s different.”

“How would Tyrion know?” He asked, and not unkindly. “Love is the death of duty, that was something else Bran told me.” He saw the way Jon flinched, and knew that Bran was right to send those two messages. “Maybe he’s right. I knew what Cersei was a long time ago, and I didn’t stop her. I wanted to believe she was still the girl I grew up with, but she isn’t, and I don’t know that she ever was.” He glanced at Davos, but the other man had the decency to avert his gaze, just a bit. There was no judgment in it, even if he couldn’t understand why a man would lay with his own sister. Jaime was grateful for that. He thought for a moment that Davos might be like Brienne, better than most of them. “You see,” Jaime continued, a little more gently, “I understand a bit about it. I know you love her, and I know that you wish you didn’t. You loved her before you knew she was your own blood, we’re different in that, but you haven’t stopped loving her. You haven’t stopped wanting her, despite the truth of it. We can’t choose who we love, your grace, but we can choose what we do about it. Tyrion never knew Aerys, if he had, I’m sure my dear brother would have been more cautious. I’m sure there’s something in her that you both saw that earned your devotion. I know Tyrion, he has a good heart, better than mine, certainly. I know he believes in her, and I know that you do too. Even Aerys wasn’t mad at the beginning. He was beloved by many for a long time, and Rhaella was sweet and kind, and good. I’m sure there’s much of her in her daughter, but where Rhaegar was never anything like Aerys, Daenerys is too much like him. Just as Cersei was always too much like our father. I would be happy to know I’m wrong, and you can save her,” he admitted, “for your sake as well as the memory of her mother, but what I do know is that you cannot sacrifice the realm for the dream of her.”

“How will I know?” Jon stared at him, desperate for any chance to hold on to what might be, but understanding his duty went beyond the desires of his heart. “If she can’t be saved, how do I tell? I understand what you’re saying, but if she’s not lost, she doesn’t deserve to be forsaken. She went north too,” Jon reminded him. “She lost one of her children, her dearest friend, and much of her army to fight for us. Not for the crown, or for the sake of ruling the kingdoms, but because it was right. I can’t believe she would do that if she was so far gone.”

“She may not be,” Jaime agreed. “Cersei certainly is,” he acknowledged. “I don’t know if I’m the one to answer that. I let it go on too long with my sister. It was beyond my control long ago.”

“Tell her about the wildfire,” Davos suggested, speaking for the first time. He took a step toward the
two men and cleared his throat. “Give her the choice. If she agrees to keep Drogon out of the fight, or limit him to Euron Greyjoy’s fleet… then she isn’t as lost as we fear, and it was grief that pushed her over the edge with Varys. She was ruthless with the Tarlys, I agree,” he nodded at Jaime, “but Ser Jorah told me that she regretted it later. There are many that would mistake being ruthless for madness. Losing Lord Varys is regrettable, surely, and I would hope she would feel that later. He was loyal to the realm, if not the crown, and always truthful in that. There’s no dishonor in truth, as I’m sure your lady knight would agree,” he said to Jaime, “but she had just lost Rhaegal and Missandei, and she was close to the girl. We all saw it, and Cersei beheaded her, likely to provoke the reaction that her grace had. You can be mad with grief without being lost to insanity; it’s a state I know quite well. I felt it myself, after my sons…” He met Jon’s gaze, “after Shireen. I’d have cut that red bitch down, right in the middle of the battle, Night King be damned, if I wasn’t needed elsewhere at the time. I’m not often wrong about people, that’s the advantage of old age.” Davos shrugged a bit sheepishly, “I was wrong about Stannis, that’s true enough, but maybe I was a little too close to the situation, much like you are now. Much like you both are,” he acknowledged. “When you look at her,” he said to Jaime, “you see the Mad King, and men burning in their armor. You see the way men looked at you as the price for stopping that madness, and it’s hard to set that aside, I agree. Jon wants to see the woman he loves, but I’ve oft thought that she was a just woman. Ruthless yes, but no more ruthless than Sansa Stark; she sentenced Petyr Baelish to death, and not unjustly, in the middle of the Great Hall and let your sister slit his throat right there on that floor. She gave Ramsey Bolton to his own hounds, and I won’t say it wasn’t deserved, but I’d not call her mad and neither would either of you. So let Queen Daenerys choose her path. It means you’ll have to step forward, be the king she fell in love with. You bent the knee, and I didn’t exactly disagree, but it doesn’t make you less a king… especially considering.”

“What if we’re wrong?” Jon asked, because it was his duty to do so. Davos was right, and as much as he would have liked to run from it, he couldn’t do that anymore. Bran was right to remind him of it, and he was shamed to admit he had been willing to ignore it. “What if it’s gone too far?”

“Then it’s a disease,” Jaime said quietly, “and we’ll have to stop the spread of it. You’ll regret it if you don’t.” He nodded, if a bit reluctantly, “but Ser Davos is right. Give her the choice. It’s…” He sighed, “the only honorable thing to do.”

Before Jon could respond there was movement behind them. The tent flap was pushed aside and two of the Queen’s men stepped into the tent, Unsullied on one side, Dothraki on the other, but it was the man they were flanking that drew their attention. Tyrion Lannister glanced from one to the other of each of the three men present in the tent, his surprise too great to fully disguise. His brows had climbed beneath the tousled, golden curls that covered his forehead. “Brother, to what do we owe the pleasure of this… visit? I had not expected to find you here.” He could no longer predict how his queen would react when this news reached her. “Indeed,” Jaime agreed. He turned more fully to face his brother and the men that were guarding him. He recognized the Dothraki as one of the Queen’s blood riders, but did not know his name. As to the Unsullied, his face was new, and Jamie decided that she was probably keeping her most trusted commanders close to her. “I had not thought to be here either, but our young friend Bran Stark sent me with news. He did not trust that even with his great powers the ravens would not be intercepted, and it was rather delicate in nature.”

Davos nodded, grateful for the Kingslayer’s quick thinking. It would not do for the Queen or her advisors to think they were conspiring against her, even if that was truth of it, of a sort. “Ser Jaime speaks true, now that we’ve heard his news. Lord Bran was wise to show caution.”
“I can hide many things,” Jaime admitted, “but not to young Bran, it would appear. In truth, I never expected that he would look, but the Three-eyed Raven serves the realms of men, and he is determined to see our Queen on the throne peacefully, if at all possible.”

Tyrion moved further into the tent but risked a glance at his escorts. “What secrets has Bran Stark pulled from history that you would hide now?” He managed a small smile, and then leaned conspiratorially toward the blood rider beside him. “It’s a bit late to be telling us that he’s been fucking our sister, I think. The entire realm knows that secret by now.”

The man’s knowledge of the common tongue was not fluent, but he gleaned enough to snicker in response to the little man’s remark. “On the great grass sea, he would be slave, and lay with dogs.”

Jamie shuddered, more for show than in genuine response. “I’d rather not, if it’s all the same. Too near to laying with wolves, I think.” He cast a look at Jon and shrugged, “no offense my lord.”

“ Plenty taken,” Jon gritted out, but rolled his eyes at the kingslayer.

“As I understand it,” Davos stated, pretending to stop an argument before it could begin, “these days he much prefers ladies of a different sort. You might know her,” he arched a brow at the Dothraki rider, “tall lass, big sword, knocked you down on the training yard as I recall.”

“Lady knight,” the rider agreed with a nod. “Good fighter. Better than Kingslayer.”

“I won’t disagree,” Jaime shrugged. “In any event,” he continued, “Bran has been looking through history to find a way to assist Her Grace with her coming victory. He was able to see something I tried very hard to forget.”

A deep frown drew his brows together. Tyrion considered his brother. “Aerys?”

“Aerys.” Jaime nodded. “The Queen may not appreciate my interference, but her dear father had a thing for fire too, as it so happens. Wildfire.”

Tyrion felt a chill go through him. “We used most of the wildfire in the city during the Battle of the Blackwater. Surely it’s no threat now?”

“Oh little brother, I would wish that was so.” Jaime shook his head. “There are miles of tunnels beneath the city, and within those tunnels hidden caches of wildfire. Surrender was not a concept that Aerys was fond of, or at all acquainted with to be honest.”

“Seven hells,” he muttered.

“That was our reaction.” Jon stepped forward. “I’ll need to speak with the Queen, and soon. Did she travel with you?”

“No.” Tyrion shook his head. “She remained at Dragonstone. She’ll arrive with Drogon in the morning. We attack at daybreak, that is what I was coming to tell you.”

“What is this wildfire?” the Unsullied guard asked. The unease in the tent was palpable. If this was treachery against his queen, he would kill them all here and send their heads over the walls of the city with the war machines the northern soldiers had brought with them.

“The worst invention known to man or beast,” Tyrion told him. “Liquid fire. It will burn until there is nothing of it left. It cannot be put out with water or sand. Once it burns it will even melt stone. It is quite volatile, a single spark could ignite an entire city block.”
“If the Queen uses her dragon,” Davos explained, “the entire city could go up, and us within its walls. She must be told.”

“If our queen wanted to rule a city of ash,” Jon stepped forward, “she would have used her dragons to take the throne long ago. She will never forgive herself if she accidentally destroyed the people she came to save.” He wanted to believe that, and he hoped they could not see his hesitation.

“I understand Bran’s caution, but if we have any hope of reaching her in time we’ll have to send a raven.” Tyrion turned where he stood and looked at the two men with him, “Go,” he told the Unsullied, “ready a boat to travel toward Dragonstone. It’s a day’s sail, but when you’ve gone a few hours from shore, let the raven fly. That will ensure it isn’t intercepted by any of our enemies and may gain us some time.”

Jon moved to the table at the center of the tent, upon which several maps of the city and surrounding lands were spread out. He bent over it and quickly snatched up a spare piece of parchment. “Is Grey Worm with you? We should begin adapting our battle plans. We’ll need the blood riders too,” he nodded to the Dothraki present. “I will ask Her Grace to join us here as soon as she receives this message.” The Queen’s Essosi men might be able to speak the common tongue, those who were among her commanders at least, but he was certain they could not read it. He scratched out his message quickly, explaining they’d had news of dangers within the city they had previously not known of. He did not tell her the news of the wildfire had come from Winterfell. Jon was certain she would not trust any assistance his family might be attempting to give them.

“What about Kingslayer?” The blood rider asked. “He was meant to stay north.”

“I think our Queen would understand, considering,” Tyrion replied. “I will take responsibility for my brother. I have been doing it for most of my life,” he said drolly.

“That won’t be necessary,” Jon told them. “Ser Jaime is sworn to me. I will vouch for his loyalty with the Queen.”

“Truly?” Tyrion whirled, turning surprised eyes on his brother. That was more astonishing than anything else they might have told him.

Jaime shrugged at him. It was better, he decided, taking his cue from Jon, that his brother think that he had sworn himself to the Starks, and not his Targaryen Prince. “It was bound to happen eventually. I am certain that in whichever of the seven hells our father is residing in, he is currently cursing my name and plotting no end of torments for when I finally join him there.”

“Did your Lady Knight put you up to this?” Tyrion shook his head in disbelief and not a little bemusement. “You are a besotted fool, aren’t you?”

His head bowed as he lowered his gaze. “Brother, you truly have no idea.” It had gone well beyond besotted at this point. The ache of longing he felt for her was a constant companion, but he feared he would never see her again. That was the price he would bear for paying this debt. If she were there, she would likely punch him for being so maudlin. A small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I love the wench. I fully admit that I’m an idiot about most things, but I am her idiot, and I am not too proud for it to be known.”

Tyrion’s eyes narrowed as he studied his brother. He had originally wondered if that relationship was simply convenient, a way of gaining favor with the Starks while his brother was in the north. He would admit, finding Jaime had ridden south, that he wondered at his brother’s true loyalty. Those thoughts faded when his brother finally met his gaze. “I believe you truly are,” he said, with some amount of astonishment. Tyrion never thought Jaime would be free of their dear, sweet sister’s spell,
but it seemed he had finally broken free of it.

“Many a man has been willing to change his spots for the right woman,” Davos pointed out. He was once such a fool. “The love of a good woman can do a lot, speaking strictly from experience, of course.”

“Ser Davos,” Jaime smirked at him, “by the Seven, is there any thing you haven’t done?”

Davos shrugged. From the corner of his eye, he saw Jon setting his seal upon the now rolled scroll. “Jousting, terrible sport in my opinion. Too many places a lance can go that a man wouldn’t like it.”

“Too right you are,” Jaime laughed. He watched as Tyrion explained it to the two Essosi and saw them both shudder. He laughed harder, “Aye, and to think, we foolish knights enjoy the sport of it.”

“You enjoyed the cheers of the crowd,” Tyrion reminded him.

“For good reason. I was quite good in my day,” Jaime reminded him. “I wonder…” He considered his golden hand. He’d done well enough riding toward the Queen and her dragon on the Goldroad; he wondered how he would do at tournament.

“Oh, you cannot be serious,” Tyrion threw his arms up. “Here we are, hours from war, and you’re thinking of how well you’d do riding a joust? Yes, dearest brother, you are truly an unparalleled idiot.”

Jaime shrugged. “Ser Davos brought it up.” A slow smirk curved across his lips. “To be honest, I was wondering if my Lady Knight would be willing to ride against me. There must be something I could best her at. What is there to jousting, truly? You ride the horse, hold the lance, and don’t fall off. Even I should be able to manage that much with only one good hand.”

“No.” The blood rider shook his head. “I see you ride.” He grinned. “Lady Knight would win.”

“Probably,” he sighed. “She’s too stubbornly honorable to let me win to save my pride. Actually, now I think on it, she’d enjoy beating me. She usually does.” He frowned. “Seven help me, I am a besotted fool.”

“Aye. You are at that.” Jon stepped up beside him and held the scroll out for the Dothraki blood rider to take. “Have this sent to our Queen as quickly as you can, then return with the others. We have battle plans to make.”

The blood rider glanced at his Queen’s Hand, and when the small man nodded, he took the scroll and left the tent.

As the remaining men gathered around the table at the center of the tent, Jaime scowled. It took him only a moment to discern what their original plan had been. From the lions posted around the walls, and what he’d seen with his own eyes, he deduced that Cersei had quite a few of Qyburn’s scorpions on hand. Their entire battle plan, however, seemed to hinge almost entirely upon the dragon. “No wonder Bran sent me, specifically,” he muttered.

Jaime thought the situation with the Night King’s army had been unique, but he could see now that his original summation was correct. These men were entirely ill equipped for the ways of war and command. Jon Snow was good at leading men, that was true, but they were no longer facing an army of dead men with no ability to think, or plan, or adapt. His prince would need to learn how to command an army, and quickly. “The first thing you should remember,” he said, and began redistributing the enemy markers as he expected them to deploy, “is that there is rarely honor in warfare and your enemy wants to kill you, not capture you. Cersei is hardly ever just content with
simply triumphing over her enemies. She prefers to annihilate them.”

“A frown knit Jon’s brows together. He watched as the markers, particularly those for the Lannister army, were moved into flanking position. “And the second thing?”

“It’s my army.” Jaime shook his head. “Or it was, rather. I didn’t see many traces of our armies in the Riverlands. Undoubtedly, Cersei has recalled the forces that were holding Riverrun. So I would expect that she has Ser Addam Marbrand leading the Lannister forces, but even if he isn’t, this is the army that my father trained. They will fight to our weaknesses. The forces of the Golden Company will have told them everything they know about fighting Unsullied and Dothraki. They will try to cut off your riders, while the Lannister horsemen cut down the less armored Unsullied. That will leave what little remains for the northern army to face the Golden Company. They are one of the best armies in the world.”

“Anything else?” It was Davos that asked. He was a bit chagrinned to see that only a few, simple changes, had put them in better odds of both surviving and winning.

“Use the tunnels.” Jamie leaned across the table and tapped another map, which had no doubt come from Varys. “Take men into the city, get behind Cersei’s armies. Use your archers to clear the walls from inside. Unmanned scorpions are no threat to us or the Queen and her dragon.”


“The same way I got out of it,” Tyrion told him. He pointed to a tunnel that exited near the docks.

“It seems almost too simple,” Davos pointed out.

“Unfortunately,” Jaime reminded him, “it never is.”

“No,” the older man sighed, “it never is.”

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

He is a besotted fool, bless his heart. Also, I love Davos.
They had been gathered around the table for only an hour. The blood rider, Jhaggo they learned when he returned, had seen to it that the ship which had brought them from Dragonstone was launched back to the island with ravens and men they trusted to get the message to their queen. When he came back Grey Worm was with him, along with the other former Khals that now made up the blood riders of Daenerys’s Queensguard, Kaharo, Nhikko, and Qhono. It had taken some convincing to keep Grey Worm from having Jaime chained and imprisoned until the Queen could arrive to pass her judgment. It was Jon who had finally convinced him that there was no need. If their Queen meant to punish everyone who had ever opposed her, she would not have any kingdoms to rule when the war was finally won.

It was Ser Davos that reminded them all that Ser Jaime had been part of no war councils after the Battle for Winterfell, and when the Queen’s forces departed for the south, he had remained behind to assist with rebuilding the Starks’ ancestral home. How could he have had any part in the ambush at Dragonstone? That had been enough to stay Grey Worm’s hand, but the Unsullied Commander still looked on the eldest Lannister brother with an unbridled fury that promised he would find his death at the end of Grey Worm’s spear before it was all said and done.

The next interruption in their planning came when Arya Stark let herself into the tent. She had ridden into the camp with Sandor Clegane, who wanted no part in their fucking battle plans, or so she explained. He had one goal, to get into the Keep and kill his brother. Arya’s objective wasn’t so different, but as they had gotten closer to King’s Landing she had felt compelled to see her brother. She had been hearing the wolves again, the pack had followed them down out of the Riverlands, and part of her wondered if it was Bran guiding them south. She wondered if it was Bran urging her to join Jon instead of trying to face Cersei alone.

Arya didn’t know the answers to those questions, and she hadn’t posed them to Clegane. The camp had food and wine, and a warm tent he could sleep in before he faced one more fight. He grumbled at her to leave him be and sent her on her way. She looked around the interior of the tent, her brow arching when she spotted Jaime among her brother’s and the Queen’s men. “Is this the way it’s going to be then,” she said by way of greeting, “Wolves and Lions waging war with Dragons against… other Lions?”

Jon scowled at his sister, but was not truly surprised at her presence. “Arya, what are you doing here? You were supposed to stay at Winterfell with Sansa.”

“So was he.” She nodded toward the Kingslayer. “I never said I was staying. You assumed.”

“He’s come to kill my sister,” Jaime turned his attention back to the plans laid out on the table. “Cersei is the last name on Arya’s list.” He considered the changes that Grey Worm had just made and the markers that indicated the fifty men that would access the city via the tunnels. A similar tactic had been used in Yunkai, according to the other man. They would take weapons into the city to arm smallfolk that wished to fight for their freedom, and for those who would choose to fight for their new Queen. It was a gamble, more of a gamble in King’s Landing than it had been in Yunkai. These were not slaves; they were free men and women who could still choose the Lannister yoke out of fear.

Jaime wanted to try and reach Ser Addam Marbrand if he was in the city. He had squired with the
man when they were both boys. There was a time when they had been as brothers. Jaime was certain
that Addam and his soldiers would come to his side, if given the option. They had never fought
against the Dragon Queen, and any man willing to bend the knee should have that chance. The
problem was getting to Addam without managing to tip their hand or let Cersei know that he was
with the army. In the background he could hear Jon and Arya arguing over her intentions. That was
not a battle that his Prince was going to win. Jaime was only too familiar with stubborn women.
“Tell me something, Arya Stark,” he called, raising his voice above the sound of their quarrel,
“didn’t I hear a rumor once that you used to chase cats through the Red Keep?” He cast a look at her
over his shoulder. “I seem to recall a story of some sort like that from Tommen, before everything
got entirely sideways.”

“I think you mean it went to hell.” Arya strolled over to join him at the table. She stood on its other
side and stared at him. “That was around the time you attacked my father and killed his men.”

“Yes, I suppose it was,” he nodded once. “In my defense, not that there is much of one, I’ll grant
you, but in my defense your mother had taken my brother prisoner and your father had just told me
that it was on his order. He was almost as bad a liar as Jon Snow, but the fact remains that I could
have handled that better. Still, my brother was a prisoner and I was upset about that. What would you
have done?”

“I wouldn’t have done anything then,” she stated plainly, “I was just a child.” Arya shrugged at him.
“Now I would slit your throat. Like I slit Littlefinger’s… for starting the war between our families.”
Her brows lifted at the surprise she saw in his gaze. “Oh, well, there wasn’t a lot of time for story
telling after the Dragon Queen and her army arrived at Winterfell. We were all a little busy.” She
clasped her hands together behind her back and tilted her head at him. “Littlefinger planned the
whole thing. My Aunt Lysa killed Jon Arryn and blamed your family for it. If not for Littlefinger, he
wouldn’t have died. My father wouldn’t have become the King’s Hand, and we would never have
come here.”

“I see.” Jaime straightened. His lips turned down in a grim expression. Although it was likely that if
Jon Arryn had not died the secret of his affair with Cersei would still have been revealed. The old
man was still snooping into things that… well, that never should have been, if Jaime was truthful
with himself for once. He and Cersei would have still died, but Lord Arryn had been a reasonable
man. His children might have lived, as bastards, but there might have been a chance for them. It was
a price he would have been willing to pay. “Please tell me that you made him beg first,” he said
quietly.

Her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed. She supposed his family had been destroyed as much as hers
had. She didn’t trust him, and she would never like him, but Arya knew killers and she knew the
face of evil, and he wasn’t it. She nodded once. “We did.”

“Good.” Jaime studied her for a moment, considering. “Tell me something, am I on that list of
yours?”

“No,” she admitted. “You were never on my list. Joffrey was, he was the first.”

“Lady Olenna Tyrell got to him first, I’m afraid.” Jaime nodded to the table between them. “Is that
how you’re planning to get to Cersei? The tunnels into the Keep?”

Her nose wrinkled. “Why would you help me kill your sister?” She didn’t believe that he would, not
really. Part of her was expecting him to betray them to save her.

“Her fate is out of my hands now.” Jaime explained. “I would ask that she be spared, for the sake of
the child, but whether you do it or the Dragon Queen, Cersei’s days are numbered. I am here to save
the city and serve your brother, not my sister.” His words were rather matter of fact. Jaime had closed himself off to whatever he might feel about Cersei’s fate. If he didn’t, he knew he would do something foolish and he was trying very hard to not do that. He still had a chance to redeem himself; it was the same chance that Cersei had. The only difference was that he was choosing to walk that path, while she had turned away from it.

“Why now?” Arya asked him. Her eyes were still wary and filled with distrust. “Why not when she destroyed the Sept of Baelor, or ordered you to march against Highgarden, or lied about sending her army north. Why weren’t her days numbered then?” Her eyes narrowed. “Are you so craven, Kingslayer, that you would betray your own sister in a war that you can’t win? Just so you can live. Are you using Brienne because you think that will make us like you? I don’t. I won’t ever. If I find out you are betraying us, if you ever betray us now or ten years from now, I will let the entire Northern army hold her down while I slit your throat in front of her.”

It wasn’t the threat or the insults to him that made his jaw clench or his green eyes burn as bright and hot as wildfire. Jaime gripped the table as he leaned forward, his voice was low and thick, rumbling like the lion he was. His anger made him glow, once again as golden as the first time he rode into Winterfell, all those years ago. “If you so much as think of touching her I will gut you where you stand.” His eyes narrowed as he remembered the story that Podrick had told him, weeks ago, over too much ale. “Brienne has never done anything but try to save you and your sister and you hid while she fought the Hound. You’d have watched, like the rabid little wolf you are while he took her apart, and you are lucky that she beat him, or I’d have hunted you down and hung your pelt on my wall. No!” He held up a hand when Jon Snow started toward him, incensed at the way Jaime was talking to his youngest sister. “I have stood in judgment for my sins, now she can listen to some of hers. She may be the Hero of the Winterfell, and your sister, but she will not be allowed to threaten Ser Brienne in my presence.”

Arya simply tilted her head at him and arched a brow. The corners of her mouth twitched toward a small smile. “No, you’re right. I used her to hurt Sandor, and then I left him to die and rode away. She might have been dying too, and I didn’t care. All I saw was a Lannister sword. I didn’t know her, I didn’t know Podrick, and I didn’t care. The Lannisters killed my father’s men. They killed our Septa, and then they killed my father. Tywin Lannister is the reason the Freys slit my mother’s throat and cut my brother’s head off and sewed his direwolf’s head on his body. I saw it, and I might have died there too, but the Hound took me away. He tried to take me to my Aunt Lysa, but Littlefinger had already killed her. I didn’t have anyone left, or anywhere to go, and I wasn’t going to let a Lannister sword kill me too. Sandor says I’m a cold bitch, and that’s why I’m still alive. That doesn’t change what is. How do we know that you aren’t going to betray us to your sister?”

“Because I’m tired of fighting this war,” Jaime told her. “I’ve been fighting it since I was your age. I’ve outlived almost my entire family, including my children, and it cannot be won. All it’s done is rip the realm apart. The Riverlands are still burning. I left a host of two thousand at Riverrun after I broke the siege there and marched the rest back to the Capitol. No doubt Cersei recalled them after I rode north. What was left of the Houses of the Stormlands were split between Stannis and Renly. When Renly died they swore themselves to the Tyrells, and any that survived the War of the Five Kings are now gone too. We took the armies of the Reach when we marched on Highgarden to destroy what was left of House Tyrell, and of the soldiers and knights that faced Daenerys on the Goldroad, those that weren’t burned alive were conscripted to her army and died at Winterfell fighting the army of the dead. We plundered Casterly Rock and abandoned it for the Unsullied; we left only small garrisons to protect the houses of the Westerlands when we called our banners to march to the Reach. Anyone left is in King’s Landing. The Riverlands are starving, the Crownlands are abandoned, the Stormlands are conquered, and every child born to the Westerlands is taught the words of the Reynes of Castermere as soon as they can speak. They will never stand against House Lannister.” His anger faded and all that was left was resignation and
fatigue. “Cersei will never stop, she will never surrender. The city will burn, and people will die, and
if by some small miracle Cersei happens to win this war she will spend the rest of her life making
everyone who stood against her pay for that betrayal, and she will start in the North.”

She continued to stare at him. Finally, Arya reached out and tapped a place on the map without
looking away from him. “There’s a passage that exits here, by the sewers. I was chasing cats in the
crypts under the Keep, where the dragon skulls are kept. I heard two men talking about my father
and I hid from them. I was locked in the crypt, so I had to find my way out. I remember a lot of stairs
and it was pitch black. I kept going down for what felt like forever until I reached the bottom. This
was the only passage out, so it will be the only one in. Once in the crypts there are passages to
Maegor’s Holdfast, the Tower of the Hand, and the royal apartments.” She paused for just a moment.
“Tommten showed me the passage to the apartments. Joffrey used to let his kittens out of his room
just to be a shit. Tommen found the passage by accident looking for his kittens.” She shrugged. “I
had to help him find them once. We followed the tunnel all the way to the corridor outside the old
nursery.”

Jaime nodded. “Cersei’s rooms aren’t far from there. She didn’t take the King’s chambers after
Tommten died. She always preferred her own rooms, they had an easterly view, facing the bay.” He
looked at Jon. “You can get men into the keep and they can move undetected that far. There will be
at least two Kingsguard posted at her door, and one of them will probably be Ser Gregor.”

“Then one of those men needs to be Sandor,” Arya stated. “He wants to kill his brother. He has
earned the right.” He had earned that even before any of them had ever known his name or heard
him be called The Hound.

“I will go too,” Grey Worm stated. His eyes burned with fury and dared them to deny him. “I will
help him kill Ser Gregor, for Missandei.” He had watched that abomination remove her head, as if
she were nothing more than a worthless animal. He can still hear her final word ringing in his ears.

“For Missandei,” Jon nodded, agreeing. “Then what? We kill Cersei and the Mountain—”

“And Qyburn,” Jaime reminded him. “He created whatever that thing is that used to be Gregor
Clegane. I don’t want to think about what else he might have created.” He almost shuddered when
he recalled the curiosity on the man’s face when he saw the wight that Snow and the others had
delivered to the Dragonpit as proof of the dead army.

“Then we ring the bells and surrender the city,” Tyrion stated. “The people of King’s Landing
welcome their new Queen. The noble houses remaining will bend the knee and Daenerys Stormborn
of House Targaryen, first of her name, will finally begin her rule as Queen of the Andals and the
First Men, and protector of the realm.”

“Men will die,” Jaime acknowledged, “but the city won’t burn. After it’s over, we put Samwell Tarly
to work finding a way to safely destroy wildfire and we burn every scroll and text with the
instructions of how to create it.” He would personally light those fires.

Jon winced. “Sam might take offense to burning books.” They might finally see a spark of fight in
the peaceful, and often craven, almost-maester.

Jaime snorted. “I’m not worried, Podrick can take him.”

Snow opened his mouth to argue but stopped when a young Stark guard rushed into the tent, one of
the last remaining Karstarks. “Riders approaching,” the young man, little more than a boy of
fourteen, announced.
“There is no way that is our Queen,” Davos told them. “They should just be launching the raven from the ship now.”

“No,” the boy said, “these come from the south, my lord. I’ve never seen their banners before.”

“I doubt very much anyone here has,” Jaime frowned. The northmen would not be at all familiar with the Houses of the Southron families. He moved with the others toward the exit to the tent and fell in step with Snow. He wasn’t surprised when Arya flanked his other side. The rest of their group followed along behind.

There was a ridge to the east of their camp that would give them a good view of the approaching riders. The group moved quickly to climb it. Jon shaded his eyes in the late afternoon sun and squinted at the group riding toward them. “At least five hundred,” he calculated.

“At least,” Jaime agreed. His eyes narrowed. He had gotten bloody old if he was having a hard time making the banners from his current distance. When he finally recognized them, he swore under his breath. “Fuck me.”

Arya only arched a brow at him. “Friend or foe?” Her gray eyes sparkled with amusement. “Perhaps your foes are our friends.”

Tyrion pushed his way toward the front of the group and began to laugh. It was a sigil he had only ever seen in books, never at tournaments or court. “Oh dear brother. I could not have dreamed of this in a thousand years.”

“What is it?” Jon scowled at them. “Do we need to sound the alert?”

“No,” Jaime sighed. “Tell your men to let them approach.” He looked down at his brother. “Send my sword and hand to Winterfell after I’m gone, and don’t let them burn my body. I would prefer to be placed in the crypt under the Rock with the rest of the lions.”

Ser Davos cast a puzzled look at him. “Why ever would you ask that? I would think you have nothing to fear, of all of us.”

“What is this?” Grey Worm glared at all of them. “More treachery of Lannisters?”

“No,” Jaime scrubbed his hand over his face. “No treachery, treason, or betrayal of any kind… but I have a feeling I am about to die anyway.” He looked at Jon Snow, standing beside him. “It would appear, my lord, that the Evenstar has left his island and brought his army with him… at least what of it he would spare with Euron Greyjoy moving his fleet back and forth across the Narrow Sea.”

Jon’s brows shot into his hairline. “The Evenstar?” It was surprise that had him asking, he wasn’t sure he had heard them right.

“Lord Selwyn of Tarth,” Davos explained. “Father of…”

Arya didn’t bother to contain her snicker. “I thought Brienne said he doesn’t leave the island?” She squinted up at the Kingslayer. “What did you do?”

“Many things,” he muttered under his breath. Jaime turned and began making his way back toward camp.

Tyrion followed him. “Before we greet his lordship, perhaps you should tell us what exactly you did to Ser Brienne when you left Winterfell, brother.”
“The same thing I was doing to her before I left,” he snapped. “Why else am I about to be a dead man?” He had managed, over the course of a few weeks, to besmirch the honor of the man’s only heir and daughter. If he were the other man, he’d kill him too, just as slowly and painfully as he could manage.

“You’re an idiot if you think she told him that,” Arya snorted at him.

“Oh, he’ll know,” Davos shook his head. “He’s a father. Lord Selwyn will figure it out the moment this one is unable to look him in the eye. Any last words we should pass along?”

“Piss off,” Jaime decided.

Davos flashed a good-natured smirk and decided to take pity on him. He had once been a young man facing a maid’s father. “It doesn’t take long to sail from Tarth to Blackwater Bay,” he explained instead, “but he would have put in at Massey’s Hook with Greyjoy’s ships blockading everything north of there. It would only take a few days to march his army across the Kingswood. Undoubtedly Ser Brienne sent a raven to her father if he’s here. There is no other way he would have known where to find us.”

“Undoubtedly,” Tyrion agreed. “She didn’t say anything to you?”

“No.” Jaime scowled. That bothered him the most. Why had she sent for her father?

“The archers of Tarth are the best in the world,” Davos stated, as if reading his mind. “They have guarded Shipbreaker Bay for centuries. Their bows are without compare. I would say that Ser Brienne knew we would need every advantage available to us if we were going to prevail against Queen Cersei and the Golden Company.”

Jon nodded. “She’s been loyal to my family, and I know it’s my sisters that she serves, but Sansa would be worried about us.” Or Bran had seen something, more than they were currently aware of. He didn’t think Brienne would have passed that kind of news along in a raven. “Sansa is my heir, and Ser Brienne remained behind to guard her, but has sent us aid anyway. We will need to make sure that word of our appreciation reaches Winterfell.” In case none of them survived to thank her in person.

“In the meantime,” Tyrion struggled to keep up with them with his much shorter gait, “I am trying to remember everything I have ever read about the island of Tarth. As I understand it, Lord Selwyn has not left his island since before King Aerys was known as the Mad King.”

“No.” Jaime shrugged. “After he inherited the title, he went back to rule. He took a wife, guarded the bay, and sent emissaries to court and tourneys. When Renly called his banners it was Brienne that commanded her father’s forces to his call. After Renly was killed, and Brienne was named his kingslayer by the Tyrells, Lord Selwyn recalled his men to the island and remained neutral for the rest of the war. He bent the knee to Joffrey and Tommen in writing, when each of them was crowned. If Cersei sent a summons after her coronation, she never mentioned it to me.” She wouldn’t have, Tarth was a rather sore subject between them, or rather its heir had been. Cersei had not appreciated his affection toward the great lumbering cow, as she called Brienne. “I did send a letter after Brienne and I returned from Harrenhal. Hoat had requested ransom for her, which her father offered, but Hoat rejected. I wanted to make certain he knew that she was released, and that the rumors surrounding Renly’s murder were not true. There was still only one kingslayer in the Seven Kingdoms.” Jaime sighed again. “That was before I sent her off to find Sansa. What he’s heard or what she has told him since, I could not say.”

“And you are going to die.” Arya was still smirking at him.
“Well, for what it’s worth,” Tyrion said, “while no one else here will be bothered by that fate, I for
one would be willing to swear that you are betrothed.”

“No,” Jaime wouldn’t lie, not to Brienne’s father. “It wouldn’t work, anyway. He wouldn’t believe
it. She swore she would never marry a man who could not beat her in a fight.” He heard Arya
snicker again and was wondering if he could get away with tossing her down the rest of the incline.

“Yes, I think most of us have heard the story,” Tyrion agreed, “and there is no hope of that now, but
you told me you fought her before you lost your sword hand.”

“I never said I won,” he grumbled. In truth, all Jaime had ever told anyone was that it was a good
fight. It was, and he would always be glad she was the last one while he was still whole, and proud,
and golden… but he had lost.

“She beat you?” Tyron rushed to get in front of his brother and stopped him. “Before you lost your
sword hand? You lost to Brienne of Tarth in single combat?”

“Yes, and we can all bloody well thank Robb Stark for it,” Jaime snapped. “I was chained and sitting
in my own shit, in a cage, as his prisoner for a fucking year. Of course she beat me. Bloody Podrick
could have beaten me… before Brienne trained him. Now if you’ll excuse me,” Jaime stepped
around his brother and continued marching toward his doom, “we only have a few hours left before
all seven hells are going to break loose, so I think we should greet his Lordship, find out what he
knows, and figure out where best to place his archers.”

“Huh.” Tyrion wasn’t sure if he was amused or not at his brother’s reaction to this turn of events. He
did know there was a small part of him that wished Bronn was there; the sellsword would certainly
have found it amusing. “Tell me, Ser Davos, have you ever met the Evenstar?”

“Oh, indeed I have, Lord Tyrion.” The older man grinned. “This is going to be quite an interesting
conversation. For many reasons.”

Jon frowned in response to the cryptic look Davos sent his direction. He truly did not understand
what all of the fuss was about. Oddly he could hear Ygritte’s voice in his mind. You know nothing,
Jon Snow. She had never been more right about that.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

There has been a question on my mind for quite some time. What is Selwyn hiding on
that island anyway? I mean, really. He let his only daughter and heir go off to war, and
he stayed. She disappeared in the Riverlands, and he stayed on that island. He received
a ransom request... but he stayed. She leaves King’s Landing and goes who knows
where, and he stayed. Ends up in the North to fight an undead army, and what is
Selwyn doing? Knitting booties?

I mean, Tywin loathed the very breath Tyrion was breathing, but what did he do when
Catelyn Stark took his son prisoner? We aren't given the impression that Lord Selwyn is
in any way sick or infirm, and he's only 54 in the books (if I remember correctly), which
is old by ASOIAF medieval standards, but... yeah. So I poked him with a stick and told
him to do something!
An Island of Secrets

Chapter Notes

This is the point in the writing where my imagination wrapped my brain in a chain and put it on a leash, then it took it on a tour of all the twists and turns and wild ideas that could ever occur to one person... a bit like Brienne leading Jaime through the Riverlands, with all the snark but minus the sword fighting. I just hope this isn't too far out in left field, because I had a blast writing it. GoT is such a fun genre to write in, there are so many possibilities!

I was also curious to see a Jaime and Selwyn encounter that didn't include Brienne, where the men could be themselves and determine what they thought of one another.

I will also note that I went with the book descriptions of many characters.

They received the delegation from Tarth in Lord Snow’s tent. Ser Davos and Ser Jaime flanked the current Warden of the North while the Queen’s men, including her Hand, stood to the left side of the tent. Tyrion stood just a step ahead of Qhono and Grey Worm. Kaharo and Nhikko had moved to the outside of the tent to guard the entrance, along with Red Flea and Bright Snake of the Unsullied forces. Arya Stark stood in the dimly lit corner near the entrance to the tent, silent and watchful.

When the tent flap was pulled back, Jaime straightened to his full height and lifted his chin. “Steady on, lad,” Ser Davos murmured quietly.

Jon cast a quick look at his new sworn sword from the corner of his eye. He wasn’t sure he had ever seen the elder Lannister looking quite so lordly before, not even during that first meeting at Winterfell so long ago. Before he could comment on it, his attention was drawn to the men stepping into the tent.

They’d have recognized Lord Selwyn of Tarth immediately, even if he weren’t currently flanked by two of his own commanders. The man was tall and broad shouldered, but as he moved more fully into the pavilion and was no longer lit by the late afternoon sun, Jaime inhaled a sharp breath.

“By the gods,” Tyrion muttered.

Even Jon felt his eyes widening slightly. *Maybe I know some things Ygritte,* he thought to himself. He could readily see why Ser Brienne was so formidable of presence. It wasn’t only the height; it was the way the man held himself. There was a reason for that, Jon knew. It was in the pale, well trimmed, platinum and almost silver beard that framed the man’s face, and slightly wavy strands of matching hair that reached just to his shoulders. It was pulled back from his face at the temples, tied with a single piece of leather in a way that was serviceable, but not fancy. The eyes that met his, Jon realized, he had seen before. Their dark violet depths were glinting hard, stern and grim, but not entirely unkind or unfeeling. The older man’s bearing was quite stately, quite regal.

“Lord Selwyn of Tarth,” Davos spoke, introducing the man to those present, “Lord of Evenfall and the reigning Evenstar, my lords.” He cast a quick glance at the men beside him before he continued. “Lord Selwyn, I present Lord Jon Snow of Winterfell, son of Eddard Stark, and Warden of the North.”
“Snow.” Selwyn met his gaze. “I was born a Storm,” he explained. “It isn’t easy being raised a bastard, we’ve done well enough.”

“I thought I was mad,” Jaime stated. His gaze upon Lord Selwyn had not wavered. “Her eyes are the most astonishing I have ever seen, the deepest blue, purest sapphires I have ever encountered. When she laughs, however, her eyes shine, they look almost indigo, but that cannot be because only Queen Rhaella’s eyes were the clear indigo of the Valyrian skies of myth, and she had inherited them from —”

“Her father, Aegon the fifth of his name,” Lord Selwyn nodded. “Yes I know.” He met the man’s gaze. He took his measure quickly, from the way he held himself to the glimmer of the golden hand in the lit braziers at the corners of the room. So this was the Golden Lion, the best swordsman of his generation, the youngest knight in an age, and the youngest Kingsguard in history. “Aerys had the violet eyes of his ancestors, but Rhaella had her father’s eyes.”

Davos slanted a look to his right when he felt Jon go rigid beside him. “I warned you it would be interesting,” he muttered. Then he took a half step forward and nodded his head. “Lord Selwyn, it is good to see you again.”

“Ser Davos.” Selwyn inclined his head. “I had not heard that you had survived the Battle at Blackwater Bay, I am glad of it. It has been too many years since you’ve visited my hall.”

“Indeed, my Lord.” Tarth had always been a favorite port of his, even during his smuggling days. Davos missed being on the bow of a ship in the open sea, more keenly in that moment than he had in some time. “This is Ser Jaime Lannister, Heir of Casterly Rock,” he stated, although it was not clear yet who held it since the Unsullied had captured the castle, “and Commander of the Northern armies.” Davos paused for Jaime to nod before he extended his arm to indicate the men to their left. “Here we have Lord Tyrion Lannister, Hand of the Queen to Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen. The esteemed gentlemen with him are the Commanders of the Queen’s armies. Grey Worm and Qhono,” he was relieved when each man tilted his head in response to his name.

Tyrion’s eyes were narrowed. He was doing the math in his head. “Aegon or Aerys?” By his calculations Lord Selwyn could be old enough to belong to either.

“King Aegon.” the older man replied. “My mother was the third daughter of Lord Reginald of Tarth. He had two sons and three daughters. My mother, Jocelyn, was presented at court, as most highborn ladies are. One of the elder daughters had died as an infant, the other was lost in her childbed, along with the babe she birthed. By that point, Aegon had taken a liking to my mother. What she felt for him, I could not say. She died some months after my birth. I was raised in King’s Landing with Aerys and Rhaella until my tenth name day. Then I was sent to Storm’s End to be fostered as a squire with our Baratheon cousins.”

His gaze swept over the elder Lannister again, and he felt some satisfaction at seeing the other man’s expression grow increasingly more worried. Good, Selwyn thought, let him consider his actions and all their consequences. He wondered how long it had been since a Lannister was asked to do so. “I was but five and ten when my lord grandfather’s sons died fighting for Aegon during the War of the Ninepenny Kings, neither of them with an heir. I had spent a few summers on Tarth, and in those days a Targaryen bastard was nothing to be ashamed of. After my uncles died I was legitimized to my mother’s house by the crown and sent to Tarth to live as my grandfather’s heir. Aegon died a year later at Summerhall, and Prince Duncan, raising Aerys to the throne. I met my Lyarra at a tourney, years later, hosted in celebration of the birth of Prince Viserys. She was a Redwyne of The Arbor. Aerys did not like the match, but he did not forbid it. I had not been at Court in some time; Tarth may be a small island, but we are the first defense of Westeros from threats across the Narrow
Sea, and there is much to maintaining that defense and the island’s continued prosperity.”

It was the first time Selwyn had spoken so openly of those things in many years, since his beautiful dark-eyed, golden-haired Lyarra had died at least. “Even then I could see that Aerys was not the boy of our youth. He was more paranoid by the day and easier to anger. He was never overly pleasant, but he wasn’t a cruel boy, not as I recalled. Rhaella was terrified of him, and Rhaegar was more wary than any young man should have to be of his own father. After Lyarra and I were married, I took my bride home to our island and by the time our first child, our son Galladon, was old enough to be fostered, Aerys had begun making demands of the family for loyalty. With those demands came threats. It was not difficult to see that he was not a… well man. By the time he had died,”

Selwyn stared hard at Jaime again, “it was clear that leaving my island was not a wise choice. Tarth has been sworn to House Baratheon for as long as there has been a Baratheon to rule the Stormlands. It was that, and only that, which kept my head firmly attached to my neck when Robert’s rebellion was won. His brother Stannis and Jon Arryn convinced Robert that a legitimized bastard that no longer held the Targaryen name, and whom few even remembered, was no threat to the iron throne. Robert agreed, so long as I did not leave my island again.” His gaze fell upon Jon Snow once more. “Which I have not, until now.”

“Why?” Jon did not play at politics. He knew it was a frustration to Davos and Tyrion, and even to Sansa. They had no time for it now and he was a direct man. He did not appreciate games of word play. “What reason have you to leave your island now?”

The corners of his mouth ticked toward a smile. Selwyn’s brow arched. “I received a raven from my daughter after the Battle of Winterfell assuring me that victory had belonged to the living, and that she was well. Then a week ago I received another. It is odd that I receive more than a letter or two each year, so I was not expecting it. My daughter is not one to share her thoughts easily, and so her missives are generally not very long. This was quite different. It seemed recent events had convinced her to finally allow herself to consider things she long put to the back of her mind; whispered conversations heard among the servants of our hall, and the off-hand comments of those who thought themselves clever in my daughter’s presence. More simply put…”

“She met Daenerys,” Jaime stated, “and Brienne is neither blind nor is she stupid. I cannot believe I didn’t see it.” He looked at Jon and then at Davos on his other side. “It’s right there. Aerys was always rather hunched, but I am told Aegon had a strong bearing, and Rhaegar…” He trailed off and forced his gaze forward again before it could fall to Jon. There was very little in his appearance that was of his father. He was, to the unknowing eye, all Stark.

“And what would you have done had you known?” Selwyn’s tone had grown tight, clipped, ringing sharply in the tent. “Would you have cut my daughter down as you did my brother, Kingslayer?”

“I’d have sent her home to her bloody island,” Jaime snapped back at him, “in chains if needs be. Were you out of your mind to send her to Renly’s camp? What if he or Stannis had decided that the two of you were a threat to their claims on the throne? Surely, if Stannis knew, then Renly did, and how long before he shared that news with his beloved Loras. If word had gotten back to Olenna Tyrell, from one of her rosey little grandchildren, that there was a Targaryen alive that might be an obstacle to the crown Margaery so badly wanted, what do you think the Tyrells might have done to Brienne?” He took a step forward, eyes dark and shoulders stiff with fury. “What then if the Tyrells had shared that news with my father? We would have had no warning when we returned to the city. What do you think he or Cersei would have done to a Targaryen heir in their vicinity? A woman grown, proven in battle, who had already supported a traitor to their eyes and was sworn to the wife of another. They’d have made Ned Stark’s beheading look like a mummer’s show and there isn’t a fucking thing I could have done to stop it!”
The man was taller even than Brienne, but that hadn’t stopped Jaime from walking forward during his tirade until he stood only a hand’s width away from him, glowering fiercely as his voice thundered through the tent and beyond.

Selwyn looked down at him, almost impassively. “Mind yourself, boy,” he said evenly. “Even if you had two good hands I would still be your better.” So this was the lion then, the one who had so captured his daughter’s affections and loyalty.

“Boy?” Jaime’s lip curled. “I’ve not been a boy since the day Ser Arthur placed his sword upon my shoulder and elevated me from squire to knight. Any thoughts of boyhood I might have still possessed were burned from my mind the day I stood in witness as your brother burned Rickard Stark in his armor, while his son strangled himself to death. Would you like to know what roasting Northerner smells like, my lord? I think I could find an apt description if I tried hard enough. Perhaps you’d like to know how many times your sister begged her husband, the only man I wasn’t allowed to protect her from, not to hurt her. Or maybe you would like to know what it sounds like to listen to a woman cry when she has already screamed herself until her voice no longer sounds as it once did. Queen Rhaella could speak in little more than a whisper the last day I saw her alive, and I was so far from being a boy on that day, I scarcely recall what boyhood was like.” A muscle in his jaw ticked. “You asked if I’d have cut your daughter down as I did the Mad King, but you’ve picked a poor time to care for her wellbeing when you sent her off to fight a war she could not have understood.”

“Renly would not have allowed any harm to come to her,” Selwyn assured him. “The young lord’s proclivities were a poor secret to any who were wise enough in the ways of the world to know of such things, but he had a kind heart and he was loyal and just to his bannermen.” His mouth twisted toward a smirk. “I was given to believe you know my daughter, Ser Jaime. Have you ever been able to change her mind when it’s set to something? One of us needed to remain on Tarth, and it did not please me to send my only daughter and heir to war, but I weighed the decision against putting my daughter in more danger by leaving the island myself.”

Tyrion sighed. “He’s right.” He could only shrug when his brother glared at him. “Do you think I like drawing your ire? Especially when you are in this kind of mood? I rather like all my parts where they’re currently at, thank you very much. The last thing I need is to be any shorter. Jaime, think about it. You never guessed at her heritage, and you were probably the best one to have any inkling. Although to be honest most people who look at her are usually distracted by her—”

“The next words out of your mouth had best be incredible height,” Jaime warned in a low grumbling voice. He was perfectly aware of what people thought of Brienne, he had once thought it too and was rather cruel with her about it. He tried to tell himself that he had, at least, been cruel to her face rather than whispering insults behind her back. That was before he had known her, before he had trusted her, and certainly before he had loved her.

Selwyn snorted. “You’ll do.” He pushed past Jaime, effectively dismissing him, and moved to face Jon again. “My daughter wrote that your forces were depleted in the fighting against the dead, and that the continued safety of her Lady and House Stark will depend on the outcome of the coming days.” He slanted a look at the knight that now stood beside him, still glowering unhappily. “My daughter also stated that honor may compel me to fight alongside those whose existence I have long denied or hidden from.” The rest of the letter would remain between himself and his child, but she had quite taken him to task for all the secrets and lies of omission that Ser Jaime had rightly pointed out had put Brienne’s life at risk, and others through her.

It was Jaime’s turn to snort. He shook his head and turned back to Jon. “Bran would have filled in the gaps. She would have surmised. He would have looked. This has Sansa written all over it.” They were putting more men at Jon’s back, and not the Queen’s. Brienne was sworn to Sansa, and so her
father’s honor, had he any, would compel him to fight in defense of Jon Snow, if it came to that.

Jon nodded. “There is too much for him to see everything. Once he is given a specific direction it
seems easier.” Much as it had when his brother-now cousin-had managed to see the wedding
between his real parents. “Lord Selwyn, we thank you for coming to us,” he said to the man. “There
is much that we will have to tell you and very little time. I am told your archers are the best in
the world, and so you do us a great honor in answering the call. House Stark will not forget it.”

“The North remembers,” Selwyn nodded once. “Yes, I have heard that.” His head tilted. A line drew
his brows together. “Brienne said the Raven had given her what she needed to fully understand the
questions recent weeks had raised for her. She said that she would explain it all in due time.”

“It is a rather long story,” Jon confirmed. “When the war is won, if we are still among the living, I
would be glad to tell you all I know. For now, you should know that we have sent for Queen
Daenerys, and there is much else that we need to tell you.” His attention shifted to Jaime. “Will the
addition of the archers change our battle plans?”

“Not overly,” Jaime explained. “It’s an advantage, truly. The heavy longbow is poor for field battle.
They are cumbersome to marching and take years to master. For the defense of an island, or a
stronghold with walls as high as Storm’s End?” Jaime walked back toward the table and pointed at
the carefully laid out plans they had more or less decided upon. “We’ll put them here and here,” he
pointed at each position. “They’ll be out of range of the archers on the walls, and the Scorpions are
designed specifically for shooting at the sky. Lord Selwyn’s archers will be able to easily pick off
anyone standing on the battlements without being a target. Cersei’s commanders won’t be expecting
that.”

“We’re more famous for the archers” Selwyn agreed, “but I’ve also brought two hundred strong,
well trained men to be placed in your guard. There aren’t many of us, but when you’re defending an
island you learn to make every fighting man count.”

“Several times over,” Davos explained. “As we all know quite well. Ser Brienne is a credit to her
home and the training she received there.”

“Ser Brienne?” Selwyn’s brow shot up. “Neither of my daughter’s recent letters mentioned that bit of
news. Did your Queen do that?”

“No,” Jon jerked his head toward Jaime. “It was done before the battle was won and such things
could be considered.”

“She earned it,” Jaime had not looked away from the map of the city again. “The foot soldiers from
Tarth would be more accustomed than any of the Northmen or the Essosi to fighting in close
quarters. I suggest we send them inside the city, through the tunnels, with your Unsullied,” he said to
Grey Worm. “They’ll know how to use the structures of the city to their advantage. Send a few
archers with them; get them into the bell towers at the center of the city. They can cover our men
from above.”

“They’ll have a view of the Red Keep,” Arya pointed out. She had chosen to remain silent, coming
forward again only when the conversation turned back to the battle. She had no care of Targaryen or
not, or even of who sat the throne when it was all done, as long as her family was safe and Cersei
was dead. “After we’ve dealt with… things there…” She looked up at Jaime with her determined
eyes, “we can signal the archers.”

“They can ring the bells,” Tyrion suggested. “It will be the signal for our Queen that our forces have
prevailed and the city is hers.”
If she listened, Jamie thought to himself. He turned his attention to Grey Worm, who stood at the end of the table. “What will the Queen think?”

“It is a good plan,” He acknowledged. “We will take the city. I will kill Queen Cersei.”

“Not if I get to her first,” Arya muttered under her breath. Her intention was for Grey Worm to be busy helping Sandor with The Mountain while she dealt with Cersei Lannister.

“Where will you be in all this?” Tyrion wanted to know of his brother. There was a lot of talk of killing Cersei, the last thing they needed was for Jaime to get in the way and blow the plan to all seven hells.

His jaw was tight. He wanted to cuff the little wolf across the back of her head and stick his sword through Grey Worm’s gut, but Jaime held himself rigid instead. As he said before, he couldn’t save Cersei, not this time. “Here,” he stabbed a point at the center of the vanguard. “I’ll be commanding our armies with Lord Snow.” His place would be beside his Prince, they would be joined by the Lannister heavy cavalry under the command of Addam Marbrand, if he could get word to the man, but Jaime was not building his battle plan around that idea.

“I thought you preferred the left flank,” Arya drawled, a teasing glint in her fierce eyes. “I bet we could get Nhikko and Kaharo to go with you. It’s too bad Tormund isn’t here, he likes the left flank too.”

Jaime’s eyes narrowed as he returned her gaze. “Lord Snow,” his voice was silken and filled with all the courtesies he had learned at Casterly Rock and the King’s Court. “I think we should add your Lady sister to the forces that will be commanding from the rear. I am certain that Lord Royce and the Knights of the Vale would welcome her inclusion.” A slow smile curved his lips when Arya’s eyes narrowed and her mouth twisted into a snarl. “Your sister may be in need of their assistance and supervision.”

Jon grunted quietly. “Both of you stop it. We don’t have time for this. Arya, you will go with Ser Davos to make sure that Lord Selwyn and his army are taken care of for the night, and then I want you to get Clegane up to speed on the plan. Grey Worm, pick your men for the tunnels. Lord Selwyn, you should do the same, and have them report to Grey Worm.” He knew the Unsullied would be ready, whenever they went, and imagined the men from Tarth would be as well.

“What of our Queen,” Grey Worm stated, staring at the northman.

“We hope she gets our message and arrives tonight,” Jon replied with a shrug. “If she doesn’t, we go ahead and take the city and the throne in her name. We will pray to the gods we believe in that it is done when she arrives and there is only the siege of the Bay to contend with.” He sighed quietly and his lips turned down in a grim expression. “Otherwise it’s all for naught and the wildfire will destroy us all.”

“Wildfire?” Selwyn’s eyes widened. “What bloody devil brought that ungodly force into the plan?”

“Your brother.” Jaime’s gaze lifted to the man’s face. “He was rather fond of burning things.”

“I’ll fill you in,” Davos stepped forward and gestured to the tent flap. “It’s a bit of a story and Ser Jaime has told it enough already, I think.”

“I’ll grant him that,” Selwyn fixed the lion with a hard, dark look. “When this battle is over and the city is claimed, there is another conversation that you and I will be having, Ser Jaime.”

“Yes, I imagine we will.” Jaime straightened and met his gaze. “Your daughter will be part of that
conversation. She is a woman grown and a Knight of the Seven Kingdoms. She has earned the right to make her own choices, and they will not be questioned by you or any man, not without her presence or consideration.”

The corners of the older man’s eyes twitched, but the hard glint of his violet gaze did not soften. “You would stand up to me, boy?”

Jaime’s lip curled at being called that again. “You, this army, Daenerys Targaryen and her bloody dragon if needs be before I allow any of you to lessen who Brienne is or force a choice on her that is not of her making.”

Selwyn smirked, and not entirely kindly, “it was a rather long letter, Ser Jaime. My daughter knows me well. What makes you think I haven’t her consideration already?” He had the pleasure of watching the other man’s face slacken and pale slightly with shock. Satisfied with that, he turned to Davos and nodded before he swept out of the tent, his men following him.

Tyrion stepped forward to stand near his brother, gaze watching the men as they left, Davos trailing after them. Grey Worm and Qhono went too. “I like him,” he decided.

“She is her father’s daughter,” Jaime muttered. “Stubborn and headstrong. I think I may like him too.” Despite the fact that he had put Brienne’s life in danger with his secrecy, but Jaime supposed he could see his way past that. It was a hard choice to make. If anyone knew the cost of hard choices and mistakes, it was him.

“And it will be good for the Queen to know that she is not the only Targaryen left if the world,” Tyrion’s gaze flickered to Snow, “all things considered.” A Targaryen that was not a threat to her throne might be a calming influence on the grieving Queen.

Jon nodded. It was only the three of them and Arya left in the tent now, people who already knew his secret. “It will be. She has more family than she knows. She has felt alone for some time, and now with Missandei lost…” He scrubbed a hand over his face. Jorah and Missandei had been as family to Daenerys for a long time. There were too many losses in this war, far too many.

“Jon Arryn was correct about one thing,” Tyrion pointed out, “a bastard legitimized by his king would not have a stronger claim to the throne than a true born cousin. Neither he nor Brienne would be any threat to the current claim.” He said it more for his brother’s benefit than for Snow, who was by right and birth the true heir.

“I hope she sees it that way,” Jaime said quietly. Daenerys was unpredictable, more so now than she had been before. He knew his history with House Targaryen was clouding his opinions of her, and he had more reason to adjust his thinking now, but when he thought of Brienne she was only Brienne. He couldn’t seem to fold her into everything he knew of Aerys, Rhaella, and Rhaegar, no matter how much her father’s appearance was of that House. He could see it if he forced himself to, the pale hair, though it tended more toward the color of corn silk or straw, the long aristocratic nose – even if it had been broken more times than he cared to think of, and the length of her elegant neck. The next time he buried his face in the warmth of that neck, if there was a next time, he wondered if he would think of Rhaella and Rhaenys, a lost queen and princess to whom the woman he loved bore some small resemblance.

“She has a good heart,” Jon said thickly. “She does,” he told Jaime when the man met his gaze. He could see the mistrust and knew the reason for it. He couldn’t blame him, but if they were not to judge Ser Jaime for the choices of Tywin or Cersei Lannister, then he could not judge Daenerys for her father. “It’s broken right now. She is hurting and angry, but there is goodness in her. I’ve seen it.”
“There is honor in you, Ser Jaime. I have seen it.” Jaime hissed at the sound of Brienne’s voice in his mind, reminding him all too well that he knew what it was to be judged better than most thought you were, than you believed yourself to be. He nodded once. “I hope you’re right,” he said, “but it’s not the Queen’s heart I’m worried about right now. I thought leaving her in Winterfell would keep Brienne safe, but now I’m not so sure.” His jaw clenched. “She’ll have told Sansa, she’s too damned honorable to keep it to herself. I mean no offense, but I do not trust your sister. Not with this, not with Brienne, not now.”

“My sister trusts Brienne more than almost anyone,” Arya argued. “You’re a bigger idiot than I ever believed if you think that Sansa would do anything to Brienne because she knows who her family is now.”

“What is Brienne compared to the North?” Jaime asked plainly. “Compared to the safety of Winterfell and House Stark? She’s sworn to Sansa, and she would give her life to keep either of you safe, and Bran too, if it came to that, but if it came to a choice between Brienne and the rest of it…”

“He’s right.” Jon looked down at his sister when she reached for the hilt of her sword. “Arya you know he is. I asked you to swear, you and Bran, and Sansa. I asked all three of you to swear that you’d never tell another soul. She did it, right there in the eyes of the old gods, and then she told Lord Tyrion who I really am.”

“Ned Stark’s daughter would never have broken that vow. Catelyn’s daughter would have weighed the consequences against what was good for the safety of the family, but when you put Cersei and Littlefinger into that mix along with all the years that Sansa spent with both of them…” Jaime grimaced. “She’s playing the game, and she might be doing it to protect the north and her home, and even her family, but Sansa is playing the game to do it, and there’s only one rule when you play the Game of Thrones, Deathslayer.”

“You win or you die,” Tyrion said grimly.

“Then we have to win,” Arya said firmly. “I won’t lose Sansa to Littlefinger or Cersei, not again.”

“Then we win,” Jon nodded.

Jaime didn’t know how confident he felt about any of it, but they had no choice now. The wheel was turning and he hoped it didn’t run them all down in the process of Daenerys Targaryen attempting to break it.

-TBC-
That night he dreamed of her. It wasn’t the first time that Brienne had visited his dreams. He would have expected this time to be like any of the others. The baths at Harrenhal were a favorite torment for his mind. Sometimes she came to him in the White Tower, or even in the throne room. Jaime didn’t know why he never dreamed of her at Riverrun before, but that was where he found himself this time. They were back in his tent, wrapped in the furs that had draped their bed at Winterfell.

She was lying on her stomach, head resting against her folded arms. Jaime smiled as his fingers traced the length of her spine, slowly moving upward. In his dreams his right hand was whole and his fingers tingled when he touched her with it. His head was propped in his left hand. He watched her face as he drew an intricate pattern against the smooth, pale skin between her shoulder blades.

“I wish I could see you one more time,” he rasped quietly.

“Why do you think you won’t?” She sounded almost amused with him, and sighed when he drew his fingers down the length of her spine again, almost to the curve of her hip.

In the firelight from the brazier at the center of the room her eyes were the deepest indigo he had ever seen. The blue did that when she was happy or at peace, darkened to a shade that he always thought was uniquely Brienne. It was rare that he was able to see it and almost always at moments when they were alone, sated, with sleep only seconds away. The rest of the time her eyes were the same sapphire of the waters of her island home. When she was especially angry or worried they grew flinty, almost like the steel of a sword. That was a color he was more accustomed to seeing on her, but it never changed the fact that her eyes were the most amazing he had ever seen, and certainly the most beautiful.

“I think I always knew there was only one way my story would end,” he admitted. “You were something I never thought I would have. I never imagined I would ever deserve you. I still don’t. You are not for me, Brienne of Tarth.”

“Am I not?” Her eyes sparkled at him. Her lips quirked upward in that way they did just before calling him an idiot, or otherwise explaining how he was wrong. “Who am I for then, Jaime Lannister of Casterly Rock.”

“Someone good, and right, and whole.” It wasn’t only his hand that he meant. He was damaged, broken in more ways than just the physical. “I am an old lion.”

“I suppose it’s a young lion that you think I need?” She hummed quietly. “One of your cousins, perhaps? I’m sure there must be one or two still living. Should I look for them in the west or wait for them to come to me?” Brienne’s back arched as she lifted her head. She slowly shook it at him. “Tell me, will this young lion be willing to part with his hand for the sake of my soul? Would he keep me safe, even from the other half of his heart?” Brienne shook her head again. “Would he send me away, even though it pains him to part with me, because it is what I need to feel complete, and good, and just?” She leaned toward him, head tilting and allowed her lips to brush his, once, and then twice, before hers curved into a smile again. “Would he break centuries of tradition to make my dreams of knighthood true and real?”

Jaime pressed her back and rolled her until she was lying beneath him. “Cersei is not the other half of
my heart,” he told her. “I’m not sure that she ever was.” His hand moved into her hair, fingers playing with the curling, pale blonde strands. “Have you ever heard what the Septas say of twins? That they are broken souls, reunited to walk in life as one again, only to be parted once more in death. All my life Cersei told me that we were one soul, one heart, one flesh. We came into this world together and we could only leave it together. We were as one, and there was no one to break us asunder. That is not love.” He drew his hand down to trace the shell of her ear with his index finger. “It is possession. It wasn’t until you that I knew what it was to feel truly whole, even as they took my hand.”

She curled a leg around one of his and let her arm wrap around his middle. “Then how can you think I am not for you? I could be for no one else.” Her foot rubbed the back of his calf. “I will see you again. I swear it.”

“So many vows,” he murmured and lowered his mouth to hers. “You swear and swear,” he whispered as he kissed her.

“It is who I am,” she reminded him gently, sighing into his mouth when he nipped playfully at her bottom lip.

“When?” He asked her, eager to have his eyes on her again, to have her in his arms and not in any dream his mind might conjure up as both torment and comfort.

“Have you ever heard the story of the Evenstar?” Brienne drew her hands up his sides and moved them to his shoulders. “It is the guardian of the west. The first and brightest light in the night sky, shining from dusk to sunrise, a promise of the dawn. You will always find me in the east, and I will always come to you at sunset.”

“You speak in riddles. Now I know this is but a dream.” Jaime sighed. “My Brienne speaks plainly. Her meaning is known.”

“Yours am I? I thought you just said that I was not for you?” She laughed at the pout that turned his lips downward. “I will come to you on the third sunset, of the third day, of the third month of the new dawn. Does that ease your poor heart, lonely lion?”

“No.” He grumbled. “I want you here now. I should not have left.” If he stayed at Winterfell they would be together, wrapped around one another with a fire roaring in her hearth and the furs tossed to the floor as they kept each other warm with hands, and mouths, and words that could never be spoken beyond their door.

“You are where you are needed,” she reminded him. “You had to leave me to know where you belong. I do not regret saying goodbye to you, Jaime.” Brienne sighed. “I only regret that I miss you, and that it brings you pain.”

“No.” A line creased her brows and he lowered his mouth to kiss it away. “Smile at me again, forget I said anything. Don’t let me spoil this moment.” He didn’t believe he would see her again. He didn’t believe he would live beyond the morning.

“This moment is already at an end, I’m afraid.” She looked away, toward tent flap. “You need to go. Others have need of you now.”

“I need to stay.” He folded his arms around her. “You’re warm. Out there is only cold, pain, and death. Let me stay, Brienne.” He nuzzled his nose against her ear. “Please.”

She moved her hand into his hair. Her fingers combed through the short, once golden locks. His hair
was more a soft brown now, and generously peppered through with gray. “Wake up, Jaime. It is time.”

“I would truly rather not,” he stubbornly held on to her, onto the feel of her, even as he felt the edges of the dream starting to fade. He was being pulled away, and it was the last thing he wanted.

“Wake, and know that I will be with you.”

His eyes opened, even as the echo of her voice faded in his mind. His tent was dark, and not the red that his memories of Riverrun had created, but the dark gray of the Stark colors. He pressed his eyes tightly closed and drew a ragged breath. He could almost smell her, leather and soap, and the hint of lemons from the oil that Sansa used to lightly scent her rooms. Jaime groaned as he sat up on the cot. He could hear movement outside, the sound of men in armor moving about. As he swung his legs over the side of the bed the flap of his tent was pushed back. The dark head of one of the Northern soldiers assigned to guard him appeared. “They’re asking for you. The queen has arrived.”

Jaime nodded once. “I’ll be out in a moment.”

It was dark beyond the man’s shoulder. Whether that was a good sign or not, Jaime couldn’t rightly say. The only thing he did know was that Daenerys had received their message and she was coming to answer it. A chill went through him when he stood, accompanied by the screech that would haunt his nightmares for many years. The queen had arrived upon the back of her dragon, and whether she brought it to save them or burn them, he could only guess.

He drew his left hand over his face and scrubbed at his eyes. He’d had too little sleep, but that was not a condition he was unfamiliar with. His right arm was tingling at the stump, as it usually did when he woke from dreams of Brienne. Jaime sighed again and drew himself from the bed. It would not do to keep the Dragon Queen waiting. The last thing he needed was to temp her ire even more than his existence already did.

Jaime had laid down to sleep in a loose shirt and a pair of trousers. He quickly pulled on his leathers and jerkin before shoving his feet into his boots and drawing a cloak around his shoulders. He combed his fingers through his hair as he left the tent and stopped to take a moment to glance toward the sky.

There was no sign of Drogon, for which he was grateful, but as his eyes moved toward the east he found what he was looking for. There among the stars was one that shined brighter than the others. A small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth when he realized that it was guiding his path toward the center of camp, three rows down, where Jon Snow’s tent waited. That was where they would gather with the queen, he knew. Jaime squared his shoulders and drew himself up to his full height in preparation for the coming discussion and set out to join the others.

The first thing Jaime noted upon arriving was the increased number of guards surrounding Lord Snow’s tent. There were several of the Essosi, both Unsullied and Dothraki, but there were a few Northmen as well, along with the distinct blue and silver armor of the men from Tarth.

“It’s about time,” a voice muttered behind him. Arya Stark stepped out of the shadows to walk beside him. “I thought you were going to miss all the fun.”

Jaime glanced down at her with an arched brow. She was no fonder of the Dragon Queen than her sister was, he knew, but he hadn’t expected her to decide he was preferred company. “I think you’re growing fond of me, little Kingslayer.”

Her lip curled in response to being called that, especially by him. “I thought you decided I was the
Deathslayer,” she hissed.

“Deathslayer, Kingslayer, in the end it’s all the same, isn’t it?” Jaime shrugged. “Someone needed killing and you did it. Doesn’t matter what any of us call you or what you call yourself for doing it. At the end of every day, before you close your eyes, you are the only one who knows the truth of what happened in that moment. If you remember nothing else, remember that.” She would be revered for what she had done, where he had been reviled. It would be two ends of the same extreme, and with the same result, her life would never be her own again. Where people had always expected nothing of him but failure and dishonor, they would want great things from Arya.

She gave him a puzzled look. He spoke with such finality. Arya’s brows drew together in a scowl. “I’m not going to let her kill you,” she spat, and jerked her head toward the tent in front of them. He might die in the fighting, but that was the way of war. People fought and they didn’t always survive. “I don’t let people decide who lives and dies because it suits their purpose. People die because the God of Death comes for them, or because they earn it with their deeds. You haven’t done anything to earn it.” Her lip curled again and she turned her gaze forward once more. “Yet.”

Jaime snorted quietly. “That’s not entirely true, Lady Arya. I’ve earned it many times over, believe me, but you needn’t worry. I am not planning on searching out the God of Death.” He glanced down at her again and smiled when she snarled at him, “I know, you don’t like to be called Lady, but you aren’t a Ser, although I suppose I could do that if you wanted. You surely earned it with your own deeds.” Her wrinkled nose drew a quiet laugh from him. “Alright, you don’t want to be a knight. I suppose that’s to be expected. You northerners have never put much stock to Knighthood. I am sworn to your house, now, and it is proper that I address you as such.”

Arya only rolled her eyes at him. “You care about what’s proper?” Her nose wrinkled once more and she shook her head. “I’m not a Lady. I never wanted to be a lady. I’m not Brienne or Sansa.” It was her turn to smile when his brows knit and his nose wrinkled. “I was never as pretty as Sansa, and I never sewed as well as she does, nor was I ever able to sing as she does, or write my letters as well. I had no patience for any of that, even before I realized she was better. I simply didn’t like it. I didn’t want to be with the other girls. Father made sure that Sansa and I sat our lessons with the boys, but when they went off to train with Ser Rodrik, we were sent to learn other things. I always wanted to go with them. Even before Sansa and I began to fight because we were so different. I would rather have gone with Robb and Jon and Bran, learning to use a sword or bow. Being a lady was never me, even before I knew what it meant to truly be one.”

“It isn’t Brienne either,” Jaime reminded her. “She is happier with a sword in her hand than a sewing needle. She isn’t one for songs or embroidery, and you wouldn’t find her discussing gowns and hairstyles, or planning balls with the ladies of her household. She wanted to fight, and she’s quite good at it. She has commanded men, saved your sister, protected your home, and trained a pitiful excuse for a squire into valiant young fighter who will one day be a very brave and honorable knight. She was quite content and at home with her duties at Winterfell, if you knew her better, you would see that.” Jaime felt almost insulted on her behalf, but decided anyone who didn’t know Brienne couldn’t possibly understand just how discomfited she was when it came to matters of Ladyship.

“Being a Lady is about more than all that, something I learned later, and I may not know Brienne well,” Arya agreed, “but Sansa does, and you should. There was no one else for Sansa to talk to after Brienne saved her from Ramsay. It was hard for Sansa to trust anyone, but she needed to talk, and sometimes they just talked about Brienne or Tarth, anything to fill the silence when it was dark and she was afraid.” At his incredulous look she shrugged. “I wanted to know why my sister trusted her so well, especially when she carried a Lannister sword, so she told me.” Arya drew a breath and let it out slowly. He was right earlier, in how wrongly she had treated the other woman when they first
encountered each other. She knew better now, especially after speaking to her sister about it. “Brienne is the heir to her house, and one day she is going to have to take her place as the Lady of Evenfall. She wanted to fulfill her duty, to please her father and protect her people. Duty and oaths are important to her. Her home is important to her. She chose to be a knight because she didn’t think she could be a very good lady, because there were people who made her think she couldn’t be a good lady because she was too tall, and her face wasn’t pleasing to them. People like you, who think it means doing little things like sewing, or talking about stupid dresses, or just raising their Lord Husband’s children.” Arya scowled darkly. People were so small-minded, they could not see the world was wider than the little boxes they built for ones such as her, or Brienne, or Sansa to exist in. “Why? Because she is strong and powerful, and doesn’t have the dainty waist or curvy figure of other women? Because she chooses not to paint her face or curl her hair?” The younger woman looked truly disturbed by it. People should be judged by their deeds, to her way of thinking. She had seen both good and evil in the world, and none of it ever wore the face you expected it to. “She is called ugly because she does not look as someone decided that ladies should look, but who decided that?”

“Who indeed,” Jaime murmured quietly. He looked away from her, toward the tent that awaited them. He remembered Brienne’s words all those years ago, during their long trip through the Riverlands. “All my life men like you have sneered at me. And all my life I have been knocking men like you into the dust.” Perhaps the little wolf was correct; perhaps Brienne had simply chosen a life she felt more suited to the gifts the gods had given her. What had it gained her though? He had treated her abominably when they first met, and at court she had been ridiculed and disdained. She had proved her worth in the North, and was accepted there, but however content she may be now, the years had cost her, he knew.

“She’s good at being a knight,” Arya continued, “She is good at fulfilling her duty and caring for others, and she would be good at running a household. She is kind and she is good, and she had a warm heart but she had to hide it from those who have hurt her because they were too ugly to see her beauty.” She rested her hand on the hilt of her sword and looked down at her feet for a moment. “Sansa told me than Sandor once said to her A hound will die for you, but never lie to you. And he’ll look you straight in the face.” She blinked up at him. “The truest knight you’ve ever known is a woman, the first woman to ever be knighted because you did that for her. The truest knight that I have ever known doesn’t want to be a Ser because they lie, while Hounds are true.”

“What are you then?” Jaime smiled down at her, feeling almost fond of the girl, despite the fact she could kill him in half a heartbeat. She was both fierce and frightening, and possibly the most dangerous of all their fighters, even the Dothraki and Unsullied. “If you are not a lady like Sansa and Brienne, what does that make you, Arya Stark of Winterfell?”

The corners of her mouth curved into a smile. She blinked once. “I’m a wolf. I roam and I hunt, and I protect my pack.” She tilted her head to the side. “You were wrong about Sansa, you know. She won’t use Brienne, not really. She might allow someone to think she is, but she wouldn’t let her be hurt. She sent Brienne to Riverrun so that she wouldn’t be drawn into the fighting for Winterfell. Sansa knew our mother’s uncle would never answer the call. If the Blackfish had any care for us he would have tried to find us both long before Brienne told him that Sansa was still alive. She sent Brienne to King’s Landing for the meeting at the Dragonpit to get her away from Littlefinger, and so that she wouldn’t be there when we did… what we had to do. It wasn’t certain at the time, but Sansa knew that Littlefinger was already trying to use me against her, and she feared what would happen if he tried to pull Brienne into his schemes.” Sansa had thought he might try to be rid of her, and so it was better to part with her for a while than to lose her to that vulture’s scheming ways. “She could have easily sent another representative, Lord Royce would have been a good choice. You don’t trust my sister, and she doesn’t trust you.” Arya shrugged. “That’s okay. Blindly trusting people is how
we all got here to begin with. I’m only telling you this,” she sighed, “so that you understand. I protect my pack. Bran, Jon, and Sansa are all that is left of my pack now. Brienne is important to Sansa, and you are important to Brienne, so I am not going to let her,” she tossed her head toward the tent, “kill you, but I’m not your lady. If you’re sworn to my house now, then Jon is your Lord and Sansa is your Lady, but I’m just Arya.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “You’re just Arya, and I’m just Jaime. The lion does not concern himself with the opinions of sheep, but he appreciates the fierce truth of the wolf.” He grinned crookedly at her. “You realize, of course, our fathers are turning over in their graves and both of them are cursing me.”

“Of course they are,” Arya smirked at him. “You’re still a miserable Lannister shit. You are important to people who are important to me, but that doesn’t mean I like you.” She nodded toward the tent. “Are we going in there or are we just going to wait out here and let them figure it all out?”

“I suppose we must.” Jaime would have liked to delay it a little longer. “If we both manage to live through the coming days,” he said, “remind me to tell you about the time your brother, Robb, held me in a cage and used his wolf to keep me there.”

Her lips pursed as they strode toward the tent’s entrance. “Does it involve you crying like a child and begging Grey Wind not to eat you?”

As they approached the tent, one of the men pulled back the flap so they could enter without pause. “There were moments,” Jaime told her, “but it actually ends with your mother and a sword.”

“Well now you have to live,” Arya decided, “if you die before you tell me that story I swear I’ll find a Red Priest to bring you back just so you can tell me, and then I’ll kill you myself.”

It was the last part of her statement that everyone gathered in the tent heard. Brows were lifted, Jon frowned, Tyrion scowled at her, and the rest seemed to look either amused or indifferent that she appeared to have just threatened the life of the Kingslayer. “I used to be much better at making an entrance,” Jaime stated, “but it seems all things begin to fade with age.” He took just a moment to let his gaze wander over those present before he walked forward to join the group near the center of the tent. “Your grace,” he bowed his head in deference to the Dragon Queen.

“Ser Jaime.” Her disdain for him was still readily apparent, although her intent did not seem as murderous as it had previously. “My Hand was just explaining how it is you came to be here when he assured me that you would be remaining in the North as a guest of Winterfell, as well as the discovery that in your family’s haste to extinguish my House they managed to miss a few members.”

“We hadn’t yet gotten to the wildfire,” Tyrion explained. “Although now that you’re here, maybe that is a story that you would prefer to tell.”

Jaime looked around the interior of the tent again. Aside from Jon and Davos, there was also Qhono and Grey Worm, Lord Selwyn and the Commander of his army, Arya and of course Daenerys. He sighed. “Soon the entirety of Westeros will know all of my secrets,” he said. His gaze fell upon the petite form of the Queen who held all their futures in the palm of her small hand. “Before now there was only one other person that I had ever told. It’s oddly amusing that I learned today she is your cousin.” He nodded once. “Very well then,” and beneath the unwavering gazes of the remaining members of House Targaryen he began his tale, starting with the day King Aerys named him to the Kingsguard.

As he weaved together the truth of his status as hostage to House Targaryen and the darkest characteristics of Aerys’s nature, he watched the burning light in Daenerys’s eyes grow darker, while her face paled, looking almost sallow in the fires lighting the tent. The fear and sorrow in her gaze
when he reached the part that described how Queen Rhaella had fled King’s Landing, not in fear of Robert Baratheon or House Lannister, but from the danger of her husband’s growing madness forced Jaime to look away. She had never looked more like her mother, or her brooding elder brother, than in that moment. There had been little joy for the members of House Targaryen under the rule of Aerys II. Then he told them about the wildfire, and the night he killed his king.

“While I was trying not to lose my head to Ned Stark and Robert Baratheon,” he said, “Gregor Clegane and Amory Lorch were murdering the Princess and her children. The bodies of Elia, Rhaenys, and Aegon were then presented to Robert, and he spent the rest of his life hunting you and your brother, while ignoring the existence of your cousins on Tarth, although in truth, he could hardly condemn a house made up of bastard Targaryen cousins, when his own house was created from the same origins.”

“There was also the matter of oaths between Houses and their bannermen,” Selwyn pointed out. “I was legitimized as a member of House Tarth, to become the Lord of Evenfall, not as a Targaryen Prince or heir to the Iron Throne. House Tarth is sworn to House Baratheon, we have served the Stormlands and protected that coast for hundreds of years. Our ships frequently patrol the waters to the north, near the entrance to Blackwater Bay as well. We have always been loyal to the crown and the realm. There was no reason to doubt that, even given the truth of my birth. Stannis knew that, and was usually a more calming influence on his more hotheaded brother. Whether Renly knew or not, I cannot say. We never spoke of it. He was much younger than his brothers.”

“Yet, when Robert died and both his brothers declared for the throne,” Daenerys pointed out, “you answered Renly Baratheon’s call. Was Stannis not the rightful heir at the time?”

“Stannis was not Lord Paramount of the Stormlands,” Selwyn pointed out simply. “He was not my liege, and assuming we are speaking only of the Baratheon claim to the throne, while order of birth did put Stannis next in line, he was not a king. That is, however, more philosophical and neither here nor there. Renly was not much of a king either,” he admitted, “but of the pair of them, he had our loyalty and would have made a better choice.” He heard the snort that came from Ser Jaime and cast a narrow-eyed look at the man. “One day there may be time for you to explain why it is that you are so against my late Lord, but I think we will have to agree that you did not know him as those of us in the Stormlands did. When Lord Renly called his banners, we answered the call.”

“You sent your daughter to answer the call,” Jaime reminded him. He still had not forgiven that fact.

“She was safer,” the Lord of Tarth reminded him. “Renly had a fondness and understanding for those who were, like him, different and misunderstood. I could not know what your sister would do to protect her bastard’s claim to the throne. Ned Stark had already been beheaded for the sake of that secret, and there was a rumor that all of Robert’s bastards were being hunted and disposed of. I could not know what he might have told his queen. The island was no longer safe for Brienne, and I did not think it would truly come to war between the brothers, so I sent her to Renly’s camp. I miscalculated, and my daughter has paid for it. The Stormlands named her Kingslayer for Renly’s death, until the truth of it was finally known. In the Riverlands she is called the Kingslayer’s Whore, and in the Crownlands she is named a traitor to the throne for serving House Stark.”

“Yours was not the only daughter that paid the price for misjudging Stannis Baratheon,” Davos said quietly. “I too thought him a different man, a better man. I was wrong. Shireen Baratheon paid for that mistake with her life, as did my son, Matthos.”

“Unfortunately that is the way of war.” Selwyn looked at Daenerys again. “It is also the way of ruling. Mistakes cost lives. It is a hard truth and heavier than any crown, my father knew that. Yours was too lost to understand. What will you be, Daenerys Stormborn, if we put you on that throne?
Are you too lost to protect the innocent? You would not only be Queen of the Andals and the First Men. You would also be Protector of the Realm. Would you do that? *Fire and blood* are the words of House Targaryen, but do you know what they mean?"

She was astonished at the tone he took with her. There were not many who would dare, and truly most of them dead. “I was told it is how we deal with those who would betray us,” she stated, trying to sound fiercer than she currently felt. Many truths she thought she knew had been unraveled, it was almost too much so close to having lost Rhaegal and Missandei, and learning of Varys’s betrayal.

“No.” Selwyn shook his head in sad disappointment. There had been no one left to teach her, and maybe that was his failing. Perhaps he should not have stayed hidden for so long. “From Valyria the Targaryens brought dragons to these shores and conquered the kingdoms. The dragons were *va nêllyrtyr perzys*, fire made flesh. In our veins the blood of Old Valyria still lives. We are all that remains of a time before the doom that took Valyria, a civilization greater than any of us has ever known. It was a history, and people, and way of living that is lost to the world. It was to House Targaryen to preserve what remained, but over the generations much has been lost to madness.”

“The dragons were all gone in the world,” Daenerys reminded him, “until I brought them back. That makes it even more important that I take back what is mine by right. My people…”

“Your people?” Selwyn inclined his head at her. His look was inquisitive and stern, but not altogether unkind. “What makes them your people? How is the crown to be yours by right?” He saw the fire flash in her eyes. “I do not challenge you. I ask a question that every noble house will ask. What answer will you give them? Fire and blood? Will you burn all of those who do not bend the knee? Would you be a queen of ashes?” He spoke to her with the advantage of age, as one who had seen the fall of a once great house, who had to watch from afar as one half of his family was torn asunder. “Westeros was divided into separate kingdoms for thousands of years,” he reminded her, “the Targaryens conquered this land three hundred years ago and took the right to rule it as a single realm. That throne was taken, again, through conquest by Robert Baratheon; it was not stolen from you, dear child, it was won through bloody battle after bloody battle until the great Houses stood united against madness and fear. You cannot simply take it back,” he said gently, “as though it were a toy snatched from your hand. If you want to wear the crown and sit on the Iron Throne, you are going to have to win it. Will you do that with fear, or will you do it with mercy?”

Her eyes shot to Jon. *Let it be fear*, she had said to him, but what had fear gotten her, really? What had any of it truly brought her? Drogo gone. Kovarro gone. Rakharo, Aggo, and Irri all gone. Doreah had betrayed her, and now she was gone too. She had lost Barristan, and left Daario behind. Now Viserion, Jorah, Missandei and Rhaegal were all lost to her as well. If it was not truly hers, if ruling the Seven Kingdoms was not her destiny, then what was it all for? She had fought and lost again and again, and she could not bear to turn away now. “All I have ever known is the goal of taking back what was stolen from us,” she said. *If I look back, I am lost*. She had lived by those words for so long. “Who would rule, if not I?”

“That’s a very good question.” Selwyn shook his head. “There are few left who would be able to, that is true, even fewer of those who would want to. Most of the great houses of my generation are gone now. Tyrell, Martell, Baratheon, Tully… all gone but for perhaps a few here or there; Lannister and Stark left but to a few, and even House Frey, though no one would miss them, is gone. The minor houses remain, but the wars of the last several years have taken their toll on the entire realm. What is left, mostly, are the smallfolk, and they care not for who sits the throne. The smallfolk want food and fairness, they want their crops to grow, their children to live, and their lords to not ask for more in taxes than any man can be expected to pay. They have already paid in fire and blood for the game of thrones played by kings and queens, and noble houses.”
He sounded so much like Ser Jorah in that moment that if she closed her eyes, Daenerys could almost hear her gentle bear speaking to her underneath the hot Essosi sun. “What do we do then? We cannot allow Cersei to remain on the throne, I think everyone here is agreed.” She looked directly at Ser Jaime in that moment. “Are we not?”

“We are,” he said without hesitation. “She lost what right she could have had to it the moment she used wildfire to destroy the Sept of Baelor.”

“You stopped my father when he would have used wildfire,” Daenerys said harshly, “why not your sister?” Her eyes narrowed. “Did your oaths to the innocent not mean anything then?”

“I wasn’t there,” Jaime explained. “Although I suppose I should have realized she was planning something. I never imagined she would go that far. I was removed as Lord Commander by that point and sent to the Riverlands to break the siege at Riverrun. The Sept was destroyed before I returned. After I…” He looked away and shrugged. There was a thick ache of emotion in his throat. “We had just lost Myrcella, and then Tommen died. I couldn’t save them, but I still thought I could save her. It wasn’t until after the parley at the dragonpit that I realized she was lost.”

Selwyn snorted. “Perhaps we should put him on the throne, allow him to atone for his wrongdoings. There are many who would say that we are here because of the crimes of House Lannister.”

“You can try,” Jaime said evenly, “but I would have your daughter beside me, and she doesn’t want the throne anymore than I do.”

“Do you not?” Daenerys stared hard at him. “They found you sitting on the throne, my father’s body at your feet. Why didn’t you claim it? Why did you let Robert take the throne and the seven kingdoms?”

That was an accusation he had expected. She was not the first. His father had asked him that once, and Cersei. Even Tyrion had once posed the question, but out of curiosity rather than the disappointment of the rest of his family or their bannermen. “I didn’t want it,” Jaime answered simply. He shrugged when her eyes widened in disbelief. He knew he would see the same on the faces of the others. “I didn’t. I never did. I didn’t want to be the Heir of Casterly Rock either. I wanted to be a knight. I wanted to roam, and hunt, and…” He cast a sideways glance at Arya and met her gaze, “protect my pride. I was a lion, that was enough.” He turned back to the queen and shook his head.

“You were sitting on the throne,” Jon reminded him, a frown drawing his brows together. “That’s where my father said he found you. Why? If you didn’t want it, what did it matter?”

“I could tell you that was where I ended up when my legs gave out beneath me, but it wouldn’t be entirely true.” Jaime glanced away for a moment, lost in that memory, in the revulsion of what he had done. “My prince was dead, my queen was fled, and I had killed my king, their father and husband. His blood was on my sword and still all I could hear was the sound of his voice saying to burn them all. I didn’t understand why. What happened to him? He was once beloved. What happened to Rhaegar? Why did he take Lyanna Stark when his wife was devoted to him and Lyanna was promised to another? What was it that turned good men to madness? Was it that thrice-damned chair? Is that what had done it? I wanted to know.”

Jaime shrugged again. “If the throne had done it, if it had turned one of the most honorable and just men I had ever known,” he said of Rhaegar, “into the sort of man that would steal a woman from her family, then would it turn me into a monster too? I didn’t just want to know. I needed to know. I sat down to find out, hoping it would happen, because if it did then I would no longer care I had just killed my king. I wouldn’t care that the White Cloaks were little more than sellswords to do the
Crown’s bidding… even when that bidding was raping the Queen, stealing an innocent maid, and hiding her from her family while their Prince rode to war. If I was as much a monster as they were, nothing would matter anymore.” His eyes lifted, but it was Jon Snow’s gaze he sought this time. “I was still contemplating all of that when Ned Stark rode into the throne room on his destrier and judged my actions, my soul, and my fate in the span of just a few seconds.”

In the silence that descended upon the tent following his words it was Grey Worm that spoke. “Mercy.” He stepped forward to meet his Queen’s gaze. His eyes were dark and filled with sorrow and fury. “Missandei would say mercy, if she were here. Punish those who took her, Cersei, Mountain, and Qyburn. Allow soldiers to bend the knee. Cersei is not a master, but fear is.”

Tyrion’s eyes widened in surprise; Grey Worm was the last that he expected to speak with reason. He took a step forward and jumped at the opportunity presented to them with the former slave’s impassioned words. “Disband the Kingsguard. Choose your own. They can return to their lands, if they bend the knee. If they do not, send them to the Wall. Allow them to take the Black. The same is true for any of the City Watch or Lannister soldiers.”

“Is there even a need for a Night’s Watch now?” Davos looked around the tent, frowning. “The Night King is defeated. There’s a very large hole in the wall where his army punched their way through with Viserion, but do we even need it now?”

“There are still dangers beyond the wall,” Jon said, “Direwolves, mammoths, and other predators that would prove dangerous to the lands south of the wall. Most of the free folk are either with Tormund at Winterfell preparing to march back to Castle Black, or still settled in the Gift. Much of the rest died at Hardhome. I suppose there might be some Thenns left, if they didn’t join Mance Raydor when he combined the clans. They aren’t exactly… a friendly sort,” he explained, and then shrugged. “Cannibals. I imagine we’d rather they stayed beyond the wall, if any survived.”

“Then we use the Night’s Watch to patrol the north,” Tyrion stated. “To protect the Wall, and the peoples on this side of it, as they always have. The men of the Night’s Watch can be our emissaries to the free folk. We name Tormund Giantsbane as Warden of the Free Folk, a free nation without a king, and beholden only to the peace and laws of Westeros when they are in Westeros.” He glanced at Jon, and when the man nodded, Tyrion turned back to his Queen. “For those we deem too dangerous to remain here, instead of executing them, send them to Meereen. Conscript them into the service of Daario Naharis, to serve honorably or to face the Queen’s justice. We give them a chance, the Wall or Exile.”

“Send those soldiers who bend the knee home,” Jaime stated. “They served, mostly out of fear. Let them go back to their farms and their families. Of the knights and noble houses, retain them to…” A smile began to slowly curve his mouth. “A period of restitution. My father turned his armies loose upon the Riverlands and allowed them to burn it. Send the Lords of the Westerlands and their knights to the Riverlands to rebuild what my House destroyed. Allow them to return order and peace under the watchful eye of the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands, whomever that may be.”

“House Tully.” Arya stated immediately. “My Uncle Edmure still lives. Give back what was taken.”

Jaime nodded to her. He would support that claim. “Allow me to get word to Addam Marbrand inside King’s Landing, if he is there. There are those among the Lannister army that are good men, loyal and honorable, that will come to our cause. They will help us take the city. If you want to win the throne,” he said, in deference to Selwyn’s idea that it could not just be taken by conquest of fear, blood, and fire, “prove you are not your father’s daughter.”

“Show them you are Rhaegar’s sister,” Jon said quietly. He met her gaze. She had told him the
stories that Barristan Selmy had shared with her. “Be his heir, not Aerys’s.”

“I’m not though,” she said softly. Daenerys smiled sadly at him. Her heart was already broken. She could not bear to lose anyone, not when all that was left was her soul. “I cannot break the wheel if I am the wheel,” she told him. “Grey Worm is right. Missandei, Jorah, everyone that I have lost that I have loved would not ask me to destroy myself in their memory.” She closed her eyes and drew a breath that she let fill her completely, then she let it out slowly. “I am not Rhaegar’s heir. Jon is.”

“I don’t want it.” His voice was filled with all the pain and despair he had felt since learning the truth of his parentage. “I told you, Dany. You are my queen.”

“Lyanna Stark was not taken by Rhaegar Targaryen,” Tyrion explained for the benefit of those who had not known the secret, primarily Lord Selwyn. “She went with him, willingly.” He quickly outlined the abridged version of events, with the promise to provide more details at a later date, when there was more time.

“You are the shield that guards the realms of men,” Jaime reminded his Prince. “Wishing not to rule does not absolve you from that oath. You don’t have to take the throne to protect the realm. Do it better than I did.”

“Had there never been a secret to uncover,” Tyrion began, “Jon Arryn would have had no reason to go looking into things that drew the attention of Littlefinger and my sweet sister. If Joffrey had truly been Robert’s heir, there would have been no reason for the war of the five kings. That is not to say that Littlefinger would not have found a way to spur dissension, but there would have been an heir.” He sighed. “He would probably still have been an utter cunt, but a true heir might have changed many things. Do it differently this time. Remove all doubt.” He felt his faith in his queen growing again at her confession. This was the girl he had come to love as a queen, the one he would have walked through hell for. She was still there, though wounded by loss and grief. “Let it be known that Rhaegar had an heir. If you will not share the throne,” for he still believed marriage to be the best choice, “then allow Jon to abdicate, as Aemon Targaryen once did.”

“All very good ideas,” Lord Selwyn told them, “but first I believe we have to win the battle. I believe that is why you were called here, niece,” he turned his attention back to Daenerys. “We must take the city without destroying it. Claim your throne in the same way that you mean to keep it.”

She stared back at him for several moments. “You speak quite freely for a man who could find himself in front of my dragon if I chose to put him there, uncle.”

“I am an old man,” he replied. His brow quirked and the corners of his mouth twitched. His deep, violet colored eyes sparkled back at her with bemusement. “I was born and raised a bastard, never expecting more than perhaps a knighthood or to find myself serving a great house as a master-at-arms. Then all at once half my family was wiped out and I was the heir. I was given my island, but I had to earn the right to keep it. I had to prove myself to my people. I have balanced the laws of my lords and kings with the needs of the smallfolk by harboring smugglers,” he nodded in the direction of Ser Davos. “I have guarded the shores of the Stormlands, turned back pirates and would-be invaders, and watched decent men die for the good of the realm. Along the way I watched the other half of my family be wiped out by madness and death. I have lost children and a wife, and in my grief I refused to take another, though I have not known a life of loneliness. I put the burdens of succession on the shoulders of my only living child and then I sent her off to fight a war that I knew was senseless, because duty and honor took precedence over a father’s love. I have known shame, and loss, and joy. I have known kings, and princes, and usurpers alike. You do not frighten me, Daenerys Stormborn. I would help you, if you allow it. We all would.”

Her gaze swept the room again. She looked at each person before returning her attention to the man
who spoke to her with such authority. Only Barristan Selmy had ever come close to speaking to her in such a way, but always with deference to her position. He had not been family, after all. “You have heard this battle plan?”

“I have,” Selwyn nodded.

“You agree with it?” Her brow rose.

“I do,” he stated.

Davos found himself staring at his feet. His shoulders shook in quiet laughter. “By the gods, she is her father’s daughter,” he muttered.

In spite of all the pain, and the loss, and the betrayal, Daenerys felt her eyes crinkling at the corners, although she did not smile. There had been another, in recent memory, that had stood up to her in such a way, if not quite as forcefully. She looked to the table where the plans had been laid out and nodded. “Ser Jaime. Show me this plan that you have helped Lord Snow and my Commanders put together, and if we take the city from your sister, and you do not betray us, I will give you back the Westerlands and as Lord Paramount and Warden of the West, you shall work with Lord Tully to rebuild the Riverlands and repair what your House destroyed. You protected the realm once, and though it pains me, I agree that it must have been necessary. Your choices and crimes since then cannot be overlooked, but I will give you the chance to reclaim your honor.” Her gaze dropped to Tyrion and she tilted her head at him. “Let it be restitution for House Lannister.”

It was not his brother that he turned to, but his Prince. Jaime met Jon’s gaze and in the regal nod he was given, he once again saw Rhaegar shining through the younger man’s Stark features. “I accept, your grace.” He waved his right arm toward the table and his golden hand glinted in the firelight. “With Grey Worm’s help, we built the plan around the idea of taking King’s Landing in a way similar to how you took Yunkai…” With that the conversation turned to explaining their thoughts to winning the city with as little bloodshed and loss of life as they thought possible.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

All your comments have been wonderful. Thank you so much! You all are so fabulous!

I’ve seen that a few are concerned about Dany - and rest assured that I think everyone I have tagged deserved a better ending. Even Cersei, but I’ll get into that later.

Just because the Mother of Dragons needs some tissues, a box of chocolate, and Nicholas Sparks marathon to get through her feels, does not mean she is mad. Uncle Selwyn to the rescue.

Also - I found an English to High Valyrian translator that I have used for some phrases, starting with this chapter. I do not know how accurate it is, but it can be found here: https://lingojam.com/EnglishtoValyrianTranslator
After explaining their battle plans to Daenerys, making adjustments where needed based on her own ideas and her knowledge of Drogon’s abilities and range, the queen had then looked at Ser Jaime and Lord Selwyn as experienced commanders and asked their honest opinion of when the attack should truly take place.

“I would not attack on the morrow,” Selwyn told her. “There is too little time remaining to move everyone into place and explain the plan to the knights leading each host of men.”

“I would wait,” Jaime agreed with a nod. “A few days, no more. To be honest, I would move the army into a standard siege formation. Let us make Cersei believe that is what we intend to do. In the meantime, under the cover of night, we send our men into the city through the tunnels. We allow them to move into place and find those who would be our allies. We have no one inside right now. I can tell you what I would expect Cersei to do, based on the men who surround her now, but that would be an assumption. I could be entirely wrong.”

“If we wait,” Selwyn continued, “then we have an opportunity to know. It also gives your men a chance to further rest and prepare for the battle to come. They’ve just fought and won an almost impossible battle, and then you marched them south, over a thousand leagues, while the opposing army sat and waited. What can Cersei and her forces do now but wonder when the attack will come? They are barricaded within their walls. There are no more reinforcements to be had for the tyrant queen.”

“What say you?” Daenerys turned her attention on Jon and Ser Davos. “Would you agree with them? Now that we are here, do we continue to delay? Or do we move forward as planned?” She was anxious to have it done, but not if the delay was the difference between winning and losing. She had already lost far too much.

“We should wait.” Jon almost sagged with relief. She was showing more wisdom than she had in weeks. It gave him hope that his belief in her had not been misplaced, and he could further ignore the doubts of others. “Let our men rest, while we continue to plan. When we attack the city, there should be no hesitation on our part, and there can be no mistakes.”

“Then we shall wait.” Daenerys nodded. “In the morning we move into siege formation. Let them think we have come to starve them out, that we are unable to engage in a difficult battle.”

“Send your dragon away,” Jaime suggested. “Let yourself be seen in the camp. You’ll be well protected, they cannot harm you; make my sister believe that you are unwilling to risk your last dragon in this fight. When we do attack, it will be more of a surprise when you take out the Iron Fleet.”

Her gaze moved to Grey Worm, and when he nodded his agreement, Daenerys acquiesced. “I will send him back to Dragonstone. He will come to me when he is needed. Anything else?” When there was no response, she dismissed them, all but Jon.

He continued to stare at the maps and scrolls spread out on the table between them. “It is a good plan,” he said. “We will take the city and you will rule as you always wanted.” His voice was thick. Jon knew that reclaiming the iron throne was all she had dreamed of for a long time. He wished they
could go back, turn back time somehow so that he didn’t know whom his parents were, so that he could still love her without feeling so guilty and miserable about it.

“I have started to wonder if crossing the sea was worth it.” Daenerys sighed. She moved closer to one of the braziers that were keeping the tent warm and lit. “When I left Meereen I had had three strong, beautiful dragons, the greatest army the world had ever known, and allies, advisors and friends. Now what do I have? What has coming here truly gotten me?” She stared at the flames, for in them there was as much comfort as warmth. “Two of my children are dead. I have lost half my army. My allies are gone, or have betrayed me, and my advisors… my friends…” She broke off and closed her eyes; the grief of losing Missandei was still too fresh.

“I cannot give you back your army,” Jon moved around the end of the table, but while his hands itched to reach for her, and his arms ached to hold her, he did not move close enough to pull her to him. “I would give you back your children if it were possible, and I know you’ve lost people, but you aren’t alone, Dany.” His hands clenched into fists at his sides. “You still have friends, and you’ve made new allies, even some who you once thought were enemies. When you came to Westeros you were the last Targaryen, and now there are four of us.”

“Only death can pay for life,” she whispered. Daenerys lifted her eyes and met his gaze. “I lost Viserion, Rhaegal, Jorah, and Missandei to gain this new family, and I am not altogether certain that it’s one I want.” She looked away from him again and shook her head. “I have a nephew that can barely stand to look at me not because he is my nephew, but he was my lover for a while. Would that we had never known. Now I have an uncle, but he looks at me and I think he sees my father, and certainly he sees a child. My cousin is a formidable woman, brave and true, and your sister would have me believe that she is also wise, but how can I trust her when it is clear to all that she has given herself and her heart to the man that killed my father. It was necessary, yes, if what he says is true.” Her eyes ached with the force of unshed tears; she would not allow them to fall, she could not. Her pain was a living creature now, always present and threatening to swallow her whole. “Maybe I should never have come here. I should never have wanted the throne. Drogo would be alive, our son would have lived, and none of this would ever have happened.”

“And we’d all be lost.” Jon took another step toward her. “Without your dragons we couldn’t have beaten the army of the dead. I do not regret knowing you, Dany. I only regret that it has brought you pain.” He reached for her, allowed his hands to clasp hers. Jon drew them up and folded them together. She was warm to his touch, she always so very warm, the last dragon. “I wish I could make my head understand what my heart is trying to tell it. It’s wrong, I was always taught that it’s wrong to do what we’ve done, but it feels right. I don’t know how to accept that, to be what you need when my head is screaming that I shouldn’t. I don’t want to cause you pain, I never wanted that, Dany.” He draws her hands to his chest and holds them against his heart. “You are my queen. You will always be my queen.”

“You will always be my Jon,” she murmurs quietly. “The king in the north, the wolf that would tame dragons to save his people. None of the rest matters to me. I don’t care who your father was, if you are a bastard or a noble, or some beggar’s son. Why can’t we just be Jon and Dany? A northern boy and a southron girl; you’re more Stark than Targaryen, and it shouldn’t matter what anyone else thinks of us.”

“I wish that could be so,” he admitted. “My head isn’t there yet. I’m still trying to figure out who I am. My whole life was a lie. You don’t know what it is to be raised a bastard, the way people look at you, and talk about you. Lady Catelyn could barely stand the sight of me. I was a stain on her husband’s honor and she never let me forget it. The rest of the time she saw me as a threat to her trueborn sons, and it didn’t matter that I’d have died for any of them. I wasn’t good enough. I was the bastard of Winterfell. At Castle Black I was Lord Snow, the idiot who knew nothing, and before
I could figure out what I was meant to do there, I was Lord Commander. I have tried my whole life to do the right thing, Dany. I took myself out of sight when my presence would dishonor the family. I served my black brothers and tried to protect the realm, and then my own men killed me for doing the right thing. I barely had a chance to understand what it meant to be alive again before I was fighting another battle. I feel like I’ve been fighting since I could walk, fighting to belong, fighting to matter, and then fighting to live; all of it because I was a bastard, and in a single night it all became a lie. My aunt became my mother, my father became my uncle, and the man who sired me was the man the entire realm thought a monster for stealing her away from the north. I don’t know how to be who I was before I knew the truth because I don’t even know who I am anymore.”

She pulled her hands out of his grasp and buried them into his hair, holding him in place so that her gaze burned into his. “You are Jon,” she said. “You are the sword in the darkness; the protector of this realm. You are a friend to the free folk, a keeper of dire wolves and a rider of dragons. You are brother to Sansa, Arya, and Bran.” Her eyes glistened with moisture in the firelight. “You are the man I love.”

He lowered his forehead to hers. “I want that to be enough,” he breathed. He longed to believe her, to think as she did. “It’s just all too much.”

“It is,” she agreed. “I wish we could go back to the day we rode Rhaegal and Drogon in the north, go back to your secret place and stay there.” Daenerys sighed. “It all seemed so much simpler then.”

“It always does when you’re looking at the past.” Jon huffed a breath. “Unless maybe you’re Bran. I can’t imagine that is simple.” He lifted his head and gazed down at her. “Let’s win the battle first. When we have taken the seven kingdoms in your name, and laid the groundwork for peace, then we can try to figure this, us, out.”

“After we’ve won then,” she agreed. It sounded reasonable enough, and truly there was so much happening around them that it was the wisest choice. “Will you let me stay with you tonight? Just to hold me. I feel so cold, Jon, and everything hurts. Missandei, Varys, all of it… I feel like I’m beginning to freeze from the inside, and I’ve never been so cold before.”

His heart twisted at that. She had never admitted weakness before. There truly could be hope for her. A Targaryen alone in the world was a terrible thing, Maester Aemon, their great uncle, had once said. Jon felt like he understood that now. It was hard to accept how the world saw them. They were judged by the deeds of the past, by the actions of those who had come before them. “Aye,” he said softly, “stay here with me. I will keep my queen warm.”

Her lips curved into a smile and when he drew her into the circle of his arms she tucked herself against his chest. Daenerys burrowed into his warmth. He was like fire made flesh, as she was, another dragon in the world of men. Half dragon, half wolf, she reminded herself. She let him draw her to his cot, and together they lay down, still fully clothed. Dany turned her face into his neck and inhaled deeply. “Whatever happens,” she told him, “you will be Jon Stark of Winterfell, in honor of the man who risked all to keep you safe. I will tell Tyrion tomorrow. He will make sure that it is done.”

His whole life that was all he had wanted. Jon folded his arms more tightly around her. “Hush now,” he told her. “Rest, Dany. There will be time to talk of all that later.” His hands moved over her back, gently rubbing away the chill. Jon turned his head and laid his cheek against her forehead. He closed his eyes and could almost believe that everything would be okay in the end.
After the others left the tent they lingered in the clearing beyond, where each row of tents seem to converge and the walkway was lit with tall, burning torches. “Choose the men you’ll send into the city,” Tyrion told Grey Worm, “we’ll begin going over the plans with them tomorrow.”

“We should choose a couple of Stormlanders to send into the city tonight. Preferably men who are familiar with the city,” Jaime told them.

“I have someone in mind,” Selwyn nodded. “Ser Davos, will you join me?”

“Aye,” the old knight nodded, “I can show them how to get into the city without being seen.”

“I’ll tell Sandor plans have changed,” Arya sighed. It wouldn’t be a pleasant conversation, but whether he killed his brother in a day or ten days, the Mountain would fall, and she would remind him of that. “I hope there’s plenty of wine in camp, or ale. Wine would be better,” she muttered as she strode away from them.

“If Addam Marbrand and his men are in the city,” Jaime told Davos, “they will be in the barracks on the south side of Rhaenys’s Hill, near the Dragon Gate. Get word to him and he and his men will join us, I am certain of it.”

“We will,” Davos assured him. “Anyone willing to fight for the realm will be allowed to do so.”

Jaime watched them go before glancing down at his brother. It was just the two of them again and Tyrion was watching him with an expression that he knew entirely too well. “I’m going back to bed,” Jaime declared, in no mood for any of his brother’s questions or declarations.

“How can you possibly sleep at a time like this?” Tyrion hurried to keep up with him, legs aching at the effort. “We just averted near disaster, it’s a time to be celebrating.”

“Nothing is settled or won,” Jaime reminded him. “We didn’t die a fiery death, yet.”

“Yes,” Tyrion remarked, “That discussion went better than I expected. Your good father was the calming influence we desperately needed.” He was rewarded with a low growl and smirked in response. It was precisely the reaction that he wanted. His brother’s activities and motives lately were a mystery to him and he wanted to get to the bottom of that. He didn’t like being unable to predict what his siblings would do. It was both dangerous, considering recent events, and completely unnerving on a personal level.

“I’m still alive, so I won’t complain,” Jaime shot back, “but I’m not convinced that she can be trusted, she’s a bloody Targaryen.” He cut a look at Tyrion and his lip curled in a near snarl. “And Lord Selwyn is not my good father, nor do I expect him to be.” Tyrion was fishing now, and he knew it.

“Why, because your lady knight is also a bloody Targaryen?” Tyrion tilted his head and regarded his brother. “Does that now make her less in your eyes? I knew you to be poor with the ladies, but I never imagined you to be a cad.” He shook his head in abject disappointment. “She is a highborn lady at that, and one whose father is suddenly in a position to be quite influential in the governance of the Seven Kingdoms. Tell me, brother, is this aversion that you have to marriage rooted in fear of some sort, or is this about our dear, sweet sister? No, I don’t think that can be it. You’re rather protective of your lady knight and her reputation, and her life, come to think of it, so what could be preventing the most appropriate and predictable course of action, hm?”
Jaime rolled his eyes. “I have always known that Brienne is completely raving mad, now it just makes sense.” He stopped walking and turned to meet his brother’s gaze. “Not that it is any of your business, and I assure you that it truly is not, but I will not force my lady knight, as you insist on calling her, into any convention that she does not wish to enter. I will not make decisions or engage in conversations that impact the course of her life when she is not present to be part of them, as I said earlier this very day. Brienne is a knight of the seven kingdoms, a woman well and truly grown, and perfectly capable of deciding her own path.”

“You truly are the stupidest Lannister,” Tyrion sighed. “Would that you had been an only child, then you would have the brains, the beauty, and the brawn. As it is, there were three of us, and I suppose it was only fair that our gifts be divided equally.” He shook his head. “When all the fighting is done, brother, the political maneuvering is going to begin. I hope when that happens that you do not regret your current reticence.”

“Consideration is not reticence,” Jaime pointed out, “you and Cersei always did confuse that. Perhaps the two of you are more alike than any of us ever realized.” He left him standing there and strode in the direction of his tent, gait faster and longer than he knew Tyrion would be able to keep up with. It was not until he had gained the entrance to the small space that he let loose with the dark, bitter curses he had been biting back. They had bought themselves a few more days by delaying the attack on King’s Landing, but that was all. The plan might still fail. Most of them could still die in the fighting. There was no point in wasting time discussing things that would likely never come to be, and certainly not a future that he surely did not deserve.

Jaime sank to the edge of his cot. He hated the fucking north, but at the moment it was the one place he most wanted to be.

Movement at the entrance to his tent drew his attention and he sighed. “Tyrion, I told you…” His head lifted at the same time the other man cleared the flap of the tent and straightened. Jaime wasn’t sure if that was better or worse. He rose from where he was seated. “My lord.”

If Brienne topped him by a couple of inches, Lord Selwyn of Tarth stood at least a head taller. It was not his great height that was the most imposing of his features, however, and he knew that well. He had learned his bearing from kings and queens, but where madness had been wrought with age for the others, he had hoped wisdom had been his own path, and he had used that to command an island. Soldiers, sailors, and pirates alike had come to respect the Lord of Evenfall while he remained sheltered on his island, using it as a shield to separate himself and his family from the wars and ambitions of men.

He arched his brow at the man before him, who stood nervously in his presence despite his attempt to appear unbothered. The Golden Lion of Lannister, the Kingslayer, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard; Selwyn saw none of that, though the arrogance was there in the tilt of the other man’s chin as he grew impatient with the silence that settled between them. He looked past the façade for the man, battered by a lifetime of wrong choices and regrets and still bearing the scars of recent battles. His eyes narrowed slightly at the tousled hair, more tarnished now than gold, and left to grow unruly with his travels.

“Three betrothals,” Selwyn stated, “two that were well placed, but you and half the realm would have me believe that this,” his eyes wandered over the other man’s beleaguered form again, “is what has earned my daughter’s affections?” He sniffed in disdain.

“Well placed?” That pushed through his sudden unease to prick at his ire. Jaime scoffed at the other man. “Ronnet Connington was a piss poor excuse for a knight and a worse excuse for a man, and you insulted your daughter with Wagstaff, a man older even than yourself. Good that I encountered
her when I did and sent her far from that little island lest you attempt to betroth her to a man of eighty next. She is worth a hundred of them and ten of you.” As he spoke Jaime moved across the tent and began pulling at the straps of his golden hand in short, irritated motions. “Better that she is in the north now, where she can be appreciated for finer things than how well she might produce heirs for the sake of your little rock.”

He had hit on a nerve. Selwyn thought he might. The lion’s claws remained very close to the surface where his daughter was concerned. He found that curious, especially considering the rumors he had heard through the years. Tarth was not so far removed that whispers did not reach his ears. “You used that little rock to save her life, did you not?” A smirk twisted at his mouth and he shook his head. He walked over to the table in the corner and lifted the jug to pour water into two cups. He took a moment to look around the interior of the small, sparsely decorated tent. “Not the accommodations I would have expected for a Lannister of Casterly Rock.”

“We’re a long way from the Rock,” Jaime pointed out, “and to hear my father and sister tell it, I was never much of a Lannister anyway.” He had enjoyed the finer trappings of his family’s wealth, but had learned the importance of other things, as he grew older. “What do you want, Lord Selwyn? Have you come in defense of your daughter’s honor? I can assure you that it is far above reproach, and there is not a man in this army that would say otherwise, regardless of her affections for me.”

“You’re not what I expected Kingslayer, and yet you are.” Selwyn held the two cups in one hand and drew the single chair over to place it near the cot. He took a seat and waited for the other man to do the same, then held out the second cup. “The first time I heard your name in relation to my child it was in a letter informing me that she had been captured with you and ransom was being demanded. Even on Tarth the reputation of Vargo Hoat is known. I heard nothing else until that ransom was denied, and then when I was mounting a host to ride to Harrenhal and demand her release, I received a raven from you. I think you can imagine my surprise, hearing from the Kingslayer himself that my daughter had not only been freed from her captivity, but that she was in good health and a guest of the crown. I was even further surprised, some months later, to receive a letter from my daughter informing me that she was traveling to the Vale in search of Sansa Stark to fulfill an oath the two of you made to Lady Catelyn Stark of Winterfell.” He leaned forward and pinned the other man with his gaze. “Let us not pretend to ignore what is, you were a father, of a sort, I think you must understand my concern.”

Jaime sat down on the edge of his cot and leaned forward, the cup of water held loosely in his hand. He would have preferred wine in that moment, but he had gotten out of the habit of having it readily at his hand while he was in the north with Brienne. He thought of how he had felt with Myrcella in Dorne, as he had sailed toward her, hoping that he might still be able to save her. He thought of Tommen, the boy king on his throne, surrounded by more treachery than his young mind could comprehend. He even thought of Joffrey, twisted and made cruel by the arrogance of his position, his mother’s doting, and Robert’s ambivalence. He didn’t save any of them. He stood stupidly by while their innocence was sacrificed at the expense of the game that took their lives. “Yes, I think I can,” he said with a sigh.

“She was meant to be safe in Renly’s camp,” Selwyn said, “a miscalculation, as I said before. Long have I heard the rumors and whispers, and all my daughter will tell me is whether she is safe or to where she is traveling. I would have it from your own mouth, Ser Jaime Lannister… who is the woman that my girl has become?”

“A woman whose stubbornness is equal only to her bravery,” Jaime remarked, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He could read the need in the other man’s gaze, for all he had come to intimidate and impress, he was also a man whose daughter was long out of his grasp and searching for word of his child from someone who actually knew her and not only of just the rumors of her
exploits. “I am sure you will find her both much changed and much the same as when she left your island. She has known failure and heartache as well as success. She watched her king die, and was branded for it, though the truth of it was later known, the stain of that failure never leaves you.” He thought of Tommen again, and Rhaegar, and those he had failed to save. It was a shame that would follow him to his grave, he knew. “It is the Starks you owe for saving her. Stannis’s Red Witch killed Renly, but it was Lady Catelyn that got her away from the camp before she could be executed for it, then later bid her escort my unworthy hide back to my family in exchange for something far more valuable…” and with that he told the story of how he had come to meet the stubborn wench to whom his heart now irrevocably belonged.

It was hours later, the sun was sliding over the horizon and lighting the gray winter sky, their cups placed at their feet and long forgotten, as Jaime drew his tale to an end, concluding it with the battle against the dead. He had spoken of everything, filling in the gaps of their time together between King’s Landing, Riverrun, and Winterfell with what little he had gleaned from Brienne of her travels and the stories that Podrick had told over ale and wine.

“She is a hero of Winterfell, a savior of the realm,” he said when he had finished telling all he could, “the sworn sword of Lady Sansa, heir of House Stark, a knight of the seven kingdoms, and far greater than your little island could contain though I know there is still a part of her that longs for home.” Jaime leaned back on the cot and stretched is legs in front of him; they ached from the many hours of being seated. “Would that you had fostered her in Dorne, or even Bear Island, where she would have been appreciated as she was, but Brienne has carved her own place in a world of men that would not have her.”

“In a world that could not know who she was,” Selwyn pointed out. “It would have been far different had Rhaegar won the battle at the Trident. She would have been a cousin to the King.”

“It would have been her position they wanted,” Jaime told him, “not Brienne. She is better than that. You know she is, even if she hadn’t proven it with her own deeds.” A frown drew his brows together. “The truth will be known now. It is a dangerous weight to place on those shoulders, and even I’m not certain they are strong enough.”

“Secrets have torn this realm apart,” Selwin stood and his legs creaked with age. He was long past his prime, though he thought there might be some years ahead of him yet. “Better the truth is known so that peace can be found.”

“Some wounds are too deep to heal,” Jaime said quietly.

“Hers… or yours?” Selwyn pinned him with a long, knowing look. “You have decisions to make, Ser Jaime. I know my daughter, or at least the girl she was, and you are right that she is stubborn to a fault, but she must see something in you for she is surely fond. You speak of her with the reverence of a man who longs for his woman at his side, and I find myself uncertain whether to present you with my fist or a marriage contract, or both though my daughter would surely thank me for neither. I thank you for your time, and the stories you have shared. I am closer to her now than I have been for some years, and so for her, and her alone, I will offer you this advice,” his piercing violet eyes grew light, like the steel of Old Valyria from whence his line had originated. “You can be the Kingslayer or you can be the Lion of Lannister, but you cannot be both and you cannot continue to hide from one behind the shield of the other. It is a choice that only you can make.”

The man liked to make an entrance and an exit, Jaime decided as he watched him leave. Bloody Targaryens, he thought, though he found he could not completely disagree with the other man’s statement. It seemed he had been living on borrowed time for two decades, and now that time was up. He wished he knew which path was the better for all of them.
Chapter End Notes

I don't know that I will be updating again this weekend. I try to edit and post a chapter as I finish writing one. I've just finished writing Chapter 14, so this one is being posted. On that note, I'm quite a bit further a long plot-wise than what has been shared, so there are things coming that, to my mind, fixed some of the crap they handed us on screen.

One of my many dislikes of that final season came with Jon having a bomb dropped on him, and the expectation he would just take it and run with it. He needed time, Dany needed some comfort & understanding, and by gods they both finally got some.

Thank you all, again, for all of the comments & kudos! You're wonderful!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I am going with the original topography of King’s Landing and the surrounding area, instead of...the very flat re-imaging we saw at the end of Season 7 and throughout Season 8.

I also thought Jaime could use some friends, and so I've added a trio of book characters that we never met on screen - sadly. Though I think Addam Marbrand was meant to be in one scene, but no. Just No. The author refuses to acknowledge that. :)

Also, Westerosi inheritance law (tho it still favors the men) is as murky as a bog, that is all.

It was the hills and forest around King’s Landing which made laying siege to the city a difficult endeavor. They marched their army right down the Kingsroad to the valley outside the walls. They let their numbers and banners be seen as they surrounded the city and put on every facade an army prepared to starve the city on their way to victory.

They made their camp and began digging their trenches, all the while making plans to invade the city. A day and a half passed before they had word from inside the walls. The Golden Company was fortifying the outer walls of the city, while the gold cloaks kept the citizens from rioting in panic. The Lannister soldiers were being kept close to the Red Keep, as Jaime had predicted, Cersei would use them for her own defense. Of the usurper queen there had been no sign, but they knew she would be well protected within the Keep and remain there until the battle was decided.

On the afternoon of the second day of the siege a scout reported riders approaching from the west. “Thirty men,” the scout reported, “riding under a white flag of peace and flying the banner of House Lannister along with another, a burning tree…”

“That is the banner of House Tully,” Ser Euron Greyjoy explained as Jon Snow and Daenerys arrived. “A knight trials held at Hornfoot. The Tullys would be pleased to aid the Lannisters in this time of need.”

“On a smoke grey canvas,” a grin split Jaime’s face. “Ashermark,” he explained for the benefit of Daenerys and Jon Snow. “Ser Addam Marbrand and his men. It is possible he was marching back to the Westerlands when word of our arrival reached him. With your permission, Your Grace, Lord Snow, I would ride out to meet him.”

“We will all go,” Daenerys decided. “If these men would choose to fight for us, I would have their measure myself, Ser Jaime.” She did not trust him, and it could still be a ploy, a trap to break her army and split her forces, to give his sister the advantage.

The Queen and her advisors rode west to the Goldroad with a guard of twenty-five Dothraki, another ten Northmen, and six men-at-arms of House Tarth to flank their Lord. When they met the riders, Jaime dropped from his mount and flashed a wide smile as he strode toward the three men who had broken formation to meet him. “Addam!”

“Jaime.” He left his horse and joined the other man three long strides. “It has been too long, old friend,” he said.

“Old,” Jaime huffed an amused sigh as their arms clasped in greeting, “yes, I think we can both agree
on that.” His gaze swept over the other two men and his eyes lit with genuine surprise and joy. “Cousin, I had not thought to see you here.”

“I had not thought to be here,” Daven Lannister replied. “I was commanded to join the Queen’s forces with however many men I could gather from the west. It was not many, I am afraid.”

“Luckily he joined us as we marched from the Riverlands,” Lyle Crakehall explained, “so his few men are now with the best men of the Westerlands.”

“For that I am grateful.” By now the others had joined him and Jaime glanced back as the Dragon Queen brought her mount to a stop, she was flanked by Jon Snow and his brother, with Ser Davos and Lord Selwyn behind her. “Her grace, Daenerys Stormborn,” he lifted his good hand in her direction as he presented her to his bannermen “of House Targaryen, the first of her name… and forgive me, your grace, I do not mean offense. Your titles are many, and well earned, but you will want explanations. You all know my brother, Tyrion, who is now Hand of the Queen, and the other fellow is Lord Jon Snow, of Winterfell, Warden of the North.” He registered the surprise of his comrades, a small smirk playing at his lips before he continued. “Please allow me to introduce Ser Addam Marbrand of Ashermark,” he indicated the tall, copper-haired man beside him, “Ser Lyle Crakehall, the Strongboar, and finally the better of my cousins, Ser Daven Lannister.”

“Why have you come?” Daenerys did not waste time on pleasantries and small talk, as Ser Jaime had rightly pointed out, she wanted an explanation for their presence. “Surely you must know that riding toward my camp bearing the banners of House Lannister or their vassals would not be received well.”

“My scouts have been watching your camp for some days, your grace,” Addam replied. “Queen Cersei commanded my men south from the Riverlands, we were to hold the Goldroad and prevent or slow your army from marching east from the Westerlands but to be near enough to the city to join the fighting when it began.” His attention shifted to Jaime for a moment. “She intended us to flank the army, cut it off from behind and prevent any retreat while the Golden Company pressed forward from the front and smashed the vanguard.”

“You would betray your queen instead?” Jon Snow frowned at them. “Do you not owe her your allegiance?” Any man who could change sides easily was one they would be wary of, even if they had decided to accept oaths from Cersei’s forces.

“We are not sworn to Cersei, my Lord,” Addam explained, “our oaths are to House Lannister. The current Queen of the Seven Kingdoms is not the Lord of Casterly Rock or Warden of the West, to whom our allegiance is owed and freely given.” He glanced beside him at Daven and nodded.

“Your Grace,” Daven took a step forward, “Kevan Lannister, brother of Tywin, was acting Lord of Casterly Rock after the death of Ser Jaime’s father. I was made castellan in his absence when Lord Kevan was called to King’s Landing to act as Hand to King Tommen. It was Lord Kevan’s intention that he would speak to King Tommen and insist that his nephew follow through on his brother’s wishes to have Ser Jaime removed from the Kingsguard and given his birthright. The plans would have been in place when Ser Jaime returned from breaking the siege at Riverrun had other events not taken place.” He shared a grim look with his cousin. They both knew those events had included the destruction of the Sept of Baelor and the deaths of both Kevan and Tommen.

“We had thought Ser Jaime dead,” Addam said, “that is the news that Cersei has passed to the Westerlands. She has named her brother a traitor to the crown and reported that he was killed in the North, at Winterfell… with the assistance of the Stark traitors and the foreign Targaryen usurper,” the last was said with a grimace and some chagrin. “I had hoped that news was not true, but we have had no news of you,” he said to Jaime, “since word came of the parley at the dragonpit. When my
scouts spotted you among the northern armies we road out to meet with you.”

“How many men do you have?” He couldn’t imagine it was many, if they had gathered forces from the West to add to those who had been left in the Riverlands. It was certainly not the army of his youth, which had been greater than forty thousand at any given time.

“Seven thousand,” the copper-haired knight replied. “A third of them heavy cavalry, a few hundred archers, and foot soldiers to add to the vanguard with the northern armies. We were camped a few hours from here. We broke camp this morning.”

“Seven thousand?” Jaime’s eyes widened. “How is that possible? We left only twenty-five hundred in the Riverlands to garrison Riverrun. There were not that many men left in the west after we abandoned Casterly Rock to the Unsullied.”

“The Frey army,” Ser Lyle explained, his lip curling in disgust, “or what remained of it. The rest are men Daven gathered from the West.”

“Aye,” Addam nodded. “We began hearing odd rumors of a plague befalling the Twins. I took a small host north to investigate and we found that most of the Frey forces had deserted, but a few thousand had remained behind to hold the castle for the women and children. That was all that was left, and the women were rambling about a lone attacker and winter coming for House Frey. We thought they had gone mad with fever, but the Maester told us it was no sickness he had ever seen. He believed it to be poison.”

“Winter?” Jaime shook his head. “Those are Stark words.” He thought about a few of the comments the little wolf had made. “Arya Stark, I would guess. She has a list of those who’ve wronged her family. It’s all but completed. Only Cersei remains. I would wager that Walder Frey was on it.” He frowned. “What happened to the castle and the Frey women?” He had avoided the Twins during each of his most recent trips through the Riverlands, having already known that the House was all but wiped out; it was a feat that was easier for a single rider.

“I didn’t have enough men to garrison both castles,” Addam explained, “so we abandoned the Twins. I released Edmure Tully from his cell and took the women and children to Riverrun. When my forces were recalled to the Crownlands, I left Edmure installed as Lord of Riverrun with a garrison of Frey soldiers and whatever Tully soldiers he could marshal from his lands.” The knight shrugged. “I figured if we were being commanded to abandon our post it wouldn’t matter who the lord of the castle was. Either way it would either be given back to the Tullys or reclaimed from them later. It truly mattered not to me,” he admitted, “it was old Walder Frey that wanted Riverrun, and he’s dead.”

“A wise choice,” Jaime agreed. “I would have done the same. If Cersei does manage to win, unlikely though it is, she would probably do something foolish like attempt to give the castle to Aunt Genna and her Frey husband.” His aunt’s husband, Emmon, was more Lannister now than he was Frey, as were their Frey sons… those who still lived, anyway.

“Our aunt Genna will never leave the Westerlands,” Tyrion explained for his Queen, with some affection for the woman who had helped raise him and his siblings after their mother’s death, or had at least tried.

“That is the truth of it,” Daven muttered. He had been named as castellan of the Rock, but it was Genna who had been running the place.

Addam turned his attention back to the Queen mounted before them. “Your Grace, if the Lord of Casterly Rock has given you his sword, then my army is yours. We would join you in reclaiming
your throne and bringing peace back to the seven kingdoms.” He had seen too much fighting over
the last several years. He longed for an end to it.

She stared hard at them for several moments before her gaze flicked to Tyrion beside her. When he
nodded she allowed her eyes to fall on his brother. Daenerys’s brow rose. “Ser Jaime, you would
vouch for these men?”

The irony of it was not lost on him. The corners of his mouth twitched toward a smile that he quickly
suppressed. He pulled himself up to his full height and nodded at her. “I would, Your Grace.”

“Then go and bring your army east, Ser Jaime, and have them join our camp.” She glanced at Jon
and gained his approval with a slight tilt of his head. “The Northmen will ride with you and assist in
any preparations that need to be made.”

“Gladly,” Jaime said, with some relief. He would feel better about their chances of winning, his
chances of survival, if he were fighting while surrounded by his own men. He waited for the Queen
and her escorts to depart before he turned his attention back to his bannermen. “Who else have you
brought with you?”

“Ser Steffon Swyft and Ser Jon Bettley,” Addam replied. “I left them to command the host as it
marched closer to the city. We’ve been camped for only a sennight, so they should only be an hour’s
march behind us.”

“Good.” Jaime remounted his horse and waited for the others to do the same. As they rode back to
the column of guards, with the northmen the Queen and Jon Snow had left behind falling in behind
them, Jaime looked at his cousin. “Tell me,” he commanded.

“We reclaimed The Rock after the Essosi army abandoned it to march north. Repairs are mostly
completed, and a small garrison holds it in your name. Aunt Genna is running the household and
acting as castellan.” Daven moved his horse alongside his cousin’s mount as they spoke.

“For what purpose?” Jaime asked. “The mines are empty. The Rock is exactly that now, a pile of
useless stones and walls. What does my Lady aunt hope to accomplish, other than sentimentality?”

“The mines are not completely played out,” Daven smirked at him. “That is what your father and
Uncle Kevan wanted Cersei to believe. The mines to the south of the castle have gone dry, that is
true, but the northern mines are still producing…and we’ve discovered a few new veins there.” His
green eyes sparkled, “We’ve also reopened the mines at Castamere. House Lannister is not yet bereft
of gold, but had we allowed Cersei and the crown to continue spending as they were, it would be a
different matter entirely.”

“Cersei would have your head if she knew,” Jaime grimaced. “How did you manage to keep that a
secret?”

“I simply did not report it,” Daven shrugged. “The internal matters of House Lannister are of no
consequence to the crown,” he reminded Jaime. “Your sister named herself head of our House after
Lord Kevan died, but she is not the heir, she never was. Whether she chooses to acknowledge it or
not, she is Lady Baratheon, and by the laws of gods and man she was given to Robert Baratheon. A
bride price was agreed upon and a contact signed. That she gave House Baratheon no trueborn heirs
would have been a matter to be settled before the High Septon and the crown, but the laws of the
realm have not changed, no matter her accession to the throne. Cersei is, by marriage, the retainer of
House Baratheon, and not of House Lannister. Uncle Kevan knew this, as surely as Aunt Genna
does now. It is why she is acting castellan instead of claiming the Rock in her own right. By law the
seat of our house is passed through the male line, to be held only by a true born daughter of the male
heir, if no other heir exists. It was only your oaths to the Kingsguard that removed you from the line of succession, but even had they not Tyrion still lived. Only his death, or judgment passed at his guilt for the murder of Lord Tywin could remove him from the line. Uncle Kevan or his son Lancel could stand in as castellan in his place until that happened, but by the time their deaths occurred, you were released from the Kingsguard and your claim as the elder son supersedes that of both Tyrion and Cersei, even more so as your dismissal from your oaths was decreed by the king with the backing of the High Sparrow. You are now, and until your death, the Lord of Casterly Rock.”

Jaime stopped riding. Under the late afternoon sun his skin had grown pale. He stared at his cousin, and then at his old friend on his other side. When Addam simply nodded, Jaime felt his shoulders slump. He had not thought beyond the advantage of having their assistance in the coming battle, but his position brought more responsibility with it than just an army. He could deal with an army, commanding men was something that was familiar and that he was good at. The weight and future of his entire family now rested upon his shoulders. It was something that he had never wanted. He could understand now why Brienne had run so far from her little island.

Even as he had the thought, Jaime grimaced. That was unworthy of him and not true of her. He knew better than that. It was not her duty she had fled, it was the failure to fulfill it by being desirable enough for the likes of Ronnet Connington and the other cunts of the Stormlands. He was reminded of Arya’s words, days before, in that Brienne had chosen a path that she could feel comfortable with. One day she would have to see her duty done, and she would face it as she did most things, with honor and bravery and more stubbornness than any one person should have. Jaime ground his teeth together for a moment before nodding. He drew himself straight in the saddle again and met his cousin’s gaze.

“Should Tyrion or I die without heirs,” he decided then and there, with witnesses he knew he could trust, “I decree the Rock should pass to you, Daven of House Lannister. I will have it drawn up and signed and sent off to the Rock before the fighting begins.”

Daven nodded. “Thank you, coz. It is my hope that it does not come to be needed.”

“And mine,” Jaime told him. “But I am an old lion now, and I’ve seen too many battles.”

“Old?” Addam glanced over his shoulder, “do you hear that, Ser Lyle. I believe his haughtiness, Lord Jaime, has just called us old men. What say you to that?”

He maneuvered his horse forward, to ride alongside Addam and tilted his head in thought. “I think he has been too long in the north, he’s become a brooding aurochs.”

“He’s certainly as hairy as one,” Addam pointed out. “Should we remind this three-pawed lion that he is no older than us and we have barely reached our prime?”

“To the ridge then,” Daven jerked his chin at the rise in the distance before them, while a grin curved his mouth upward. “We should meet up with the rest of our host on the other side.”

“Aye,” Lyle nodded. He jerked his head at the northern men riding with them. “Keep up lads, even your Dothraki can’t ride better than a westerman with his honor on the line.”

“Seven hells!” The straightening of the three men in their saddles was all the warning that Jaime had before their coursers lunged forward. The animal beneath him pranced and pulled at his reins. Jaime scowled. “What say you, beast,” he said of the animal he had ridden south from Winterfell, where there had been any number of mounts left without riders following the battle against the dead. The burned Dothraki screamer the horse had once belonged to surely had not missed it when he left, “let’s show them what a Dothraki-bred beast can do with a westerman on his back.” His thighs
clenched tightly against the animal’s sides as he dug his heels in. He leaned forward in the saddle as the animal was off, muscles rippling as its body stretched and lunged, and the long legs bred for the desserts and grasses of Essos easily ate up the distance the Western coursers had gained.

They raced until they reached the rise and drew their mounts to a canter and then a walk as they climbed the ridge. When they crested the top they came to a stop. From there they could see the western track of the Goldroad, where it moved along Blackwater Rush. Jaime felt a shiver run down his spine and all of them grew quiet and solemn. This was where the Targaryen dragon had burned his army. There was little sign of that now, however, as the grass had started to grow back and dust had blown across the charred rocks. What had remained of the wagons and weapons had been removed, and Jaime was reminded that it had been months since that battle.

Those thoughts were pushed aside while they watched the approach of the Lannister army. “What does Cersei have inside King’s Landing,” Jaime asked, “another three thousand? Four at most, probably, if you count the number we took from the Reach before marching on Highgarden. When we went to war against Robb Stark and the North my father commanded an army of more than fifty thousand. He left another eighteen thousand in the west to protect the Rock, Lannisport and the rest of the Houses. This is all that’s left, and how many of them are Freys or Tullys? If my father still lived, this would surely shame him to his death.” Although if his father still lived he wondered if they would even find themselves on the cusp of another great battle, ruthless though Tywin was, he did not pick a losing side.

“We’ll rebuild it,” Daven told him. “Lord Tywin pulled the house from ruin once, you can do it too. Make it better,” he said, “leave it stronger than it was.”

His meaning was not lost on Jaime. Tywin had built his strength on the backs of others’ fear and weakness. That was ultimately their ruin. “Let’s go,” Jaime told them, “we’ve a queen to impress first.”

“I don’t know anything about impressing Dragon Queens,” Daven told him, eyes glinting with mischief, “but striking fury and fear into the heart of sweet cousin Cersei is something that I can definitely assist with. Come on, an army isn’t the only thing we brought you.” He turned his horse away from the others and began picking his way down the side of the ridge.

They rode along the column of men until they reached the wagons. Daven waved one of them, carved and embossed with the lion sigil of their House, away from the others. It was pulled out of the line and the army marched on, continuing its movements toward the city. Daven dismounted and strode toward the wagon as the others gained their feet behind him. He motioned the wagon’s guards to open the back and lift two chests to the ground. Daven knelt beside them and lifted the lid of the largest.

“This was commissioned in Lannisport by the same smith and armorer that has outfitted the family for decades,” his cousin explained. “Uncle Kevan ordered it when you were dismissed from the Kingsguard. It was to be packed up and shipped to King’s Landing when it was finished, to be presented to you by King Tommen as a gift for your service to the crown, and to mark your appointment as Warden of the West. I heard the manner of your dismissal was not pleasant, but Lord Kevan had thought to smooth the sting of your punishment with the return of your birthright.” As he spoke he pulled aside the linen that had been packed around the armor to protect it during the journey. Daven shifted the pieces carefully and lifted the breastplate from the chest. It was made of finest steel, enameled in crimson so dark it was almost black, and embossed with gold. At its center was not the prancing, golden lion of their House, but rather the roaring, charging lion of the old kings of the Rock. Unlike the armor of the past, it would not have the lion carved pauldrons or vambraces, but it was finely wrought.
Jaime stared at the black and gold plated steel and crimson. There was also leather that would hug his body well and allow more freedom of movement. The golden lion was the arrogant creature of his youth. He would ride into battle this time as the Lion of Lannister, the lord of his house, and if not the heir his father had wanted, the one he had needed. Jaime swallowed hard and nodded. “I think this will do nicely.”

Addam flipped up the lid of the other chest. “There’s this, too. Your Aunt Genna sent it. I think she meant for you to make quite a statement.” Whether it was against his sister or the Dragon Queen, no one could rightly say.

“The Lannister standard,” Jaime remarked, and not that bright and fancy thing his sister had preferred. It was the old one that his father had carried into battle. It was meant to provoke fear in the hearts of their enemies and bring pride from their allies. He had a choice to make, Lord Selwyn had told him. Slowly, Jaime nodded, and realized that there had been only one choice to make all along; it was the choice honor compelled him to make. “Let the people in the city and Cersei know that the realm has judged her and found her wanting. Let them see the grey wolves of Winterfell, the sun and moons of Tarth, the boar of Crakehall, the burning tree of Ashermark, and the black and red dragons of Dragonstone flying together.” He lifted his gaze away from the chests and looked at each of his men in turn. “We will fly the standard and march on the city as men of the Westerlands. Let them hear us roar.”

-TBC-
Clouds gathered over the Narrow Sea on the evening of the third day of the siege. They moved inland, bringing sheets of rain and high winds. It was a winter gale, and under the cover of darkness that was cast across the Crownlands the armies of the realm moved into position for the attack on King’s Landing. Word had come from inside the walls that many of the Gold Cloaks and Lannister forces were willing to lay down their arms once the fighting began. The Essosi fighters and Tarth archers had moved through the tunnels at dusk to take their place inside the city. Arya Stark and Sandor Clegane had gone with them, along with Grey Worm and his best warriors.

With the storm the ships of the Iron Fleet would move closer to the shoreline. The ships from Tarth and the Stormlands would round Massey’s Hook, staying close to the shore for safety, and then fill the mouth of the bay, cutting off any chance for retreat by Euron Greyjoy’s fleet. There was no better time to launch their attack.

They waited until dawn, when the storm had cleared, to surround the walls. By the time the alarm had gone off inside the city, their men were already in place.

While the soldiers of the Golden Company scrambled to man the walls, Daenerys mounted Drogon and faced her army. “Dovaogēdy. Ānogar ānograro. Bīsa bantis kesi ērinagon arlī ŋuha lenton. Kesi dāez se sikuda Dārīyi se pryjagon se grevy hen vēdros.

“Unsullied. Blood of my blood,” Selwyn translated for the benefit of the Westerosi men that stood with their queen. “Tonight we will win back my home. We will break the wheel of hatred.”

“Iksan Daenērys Jelmāzmo hen Targārien Lentor.”

“I am Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen,” Selwyn repeated.

“Iksan se ānogar hen uēpa Valyria se tubī se jēdrar kessa vāedagon hen īlva ērinnon.”

As the Unsullied and Dothraki cheered, Selwyn cast a look at the men with him. “I am the blood of Old Valyria and today the skies sing of our victory.” They could only hope that she was right. Selwyn turned his mount away and rode around to rejoin his own men.

“Well, she can give a speech,” Ser Davos said, “I will give her that.” He sat atop a tall palfrey at the side of the vanguard. He would not be fighting, not from the forward army at least. He would be in the rear guard with the Queen’s Hand, guarded by a small host of Unsullied and Dothraki, but largely protected by the Knights of the Vale. The two senior advisors of the Queen and Lord Snow would monitor the movements of the battle and send riders forward, when possible, with movement corrections.

“It is a talent that cannot be taught,” Tyrion agreed with him. “Jon Snow is going to have to learn.” Whether he would be the Queen’s consort, Warden of the North, or serve some other function in the coming reign was still unknown, but the quiet brooding boy from Winterfell who had become the quiet, brooding King in the North would have to become less quiet if he was to succeed.

“He will,” Davos said, feeling confident in the days to come there would be time for that. His King
had not had any training as a ruler, and truly that was what made him better at it, in Davos’s opinion, but he had been a young man thrust into positions he had not sought. Time was what they all needed, but what they had little of. “Jon Snow’s talents come in finding people that can do what he cannot,” Davos nodded toward the gathered men, as there was movement through the center of the vanguard.

The blue and gold armor of Tarth, embossed with silver and rose shined in the morning light as the archers marched forward and poured left and right, moving into position. The men turned and held in front of them were their bows. They were twice the width of the normal long bow, longer and heavier, and with greater reach than any other archer would have on the field that day. The weapons themselves were made with the strong oak of the trees that grew on Tarth, deep mahogany in color, and on the front there was the sigil of their house. The top curve of the bow displayed the suns and moons of Tarth in the quartered blue and rose of the House colors, but the bottom curve of the bow displayed the gleaming silver elongated star that was the symbol of the Evenstar, Lord of Evenfall. These were his men, hand picked by the Lord himself to represent his island and fight for the realm.

The Lord of Tarth followed them, flanked by his men-at-arms. Each of them wore armor of blue and silver, with gold carvings at the pauldrons. The men-at-arms wore a chest plate bearing the sigil of their house, with a heavy rose cloak at their backs. Their Lord was armored similarly, with the silver, glimmering Evenstar at his breastplate, and a grey cloak at his back that bore the blue and rose quartered sigil of his house. It had been decided that he would command his archers himself, and he rode the length of their line, to the east side of the vanguard while the Commander of his army rode to the west, to marshal the left.

Other riders followed the men from Tarth; Ser Addam Marbrand and his heavy horsemen rode their destriers through the center of the vanguard and past the Queen mounted atop her dragon in a show of strength and support, carrying the banners of Ashemark, Lannister, Crakehall, and House Swyft. The heraldry of war was nonsense, Ser Davos had always believed, but it gave the men something to believe in. It lit a fire within them and held a promise of victory. Davos straightened in his saddle as Jon Snow and Ser Jaime followed them. The two men could not have been more differently adorned. Where Snow wore the dark leather and steel armor of House Stark, with the simple carving of the wolves upon his gorget, the older man wore the gleaming crimson, black and gold of his own House.

While the horses did not appreciate being ridden so close to the seething, hissing Drogon, the two men approached their Queen and bowed their heads. She acknowledged them with a regal nod, while Davos huffed an impatient sigh. “Lord Jaime, my army is yours,” the queen spoke, “if the city is mine by nightfall, you will be rewarded. Betray me,” she warned in a low, dangerous voice, “and I will have my justice.” As though sensing her intent, Drogon stretched his head forward, teeth bared and gleaming wetly as he growled his own warning.

“Duly noted,” Jaime replied, “and agreed.” He would be committing betrayal against a queen this day, but not the Targaryen queen before him. His mind was set to his course, and he would not be changing it again. He cast a look at the man beside him, to whom his allegiance was sworn, and when his Prince nodded, Jaime turned his horse away from the dragon and rode back along the length of their army.

His tall, roan courser was one of the mounts brought from the west by his cousin. It had been bred at Lannisport and trained in the stables of Casterly Rock. There would be no finer mount for the Lion of Lannister. In the early morning light his new armor gleamed. At his side, the rubies laid in the hilt of Widow’s Wail burned like fire. He turned his horse and gazed at the men that were at his back. The banners of all the great houses that remained, whose forces were represented on the field in front of the Old Gate, were blowing proudly in the wind. The lions of House Lannister waved proudly beside the wolves of House Stark and the Dragons of House Targaryen. Cersei would be seething at the betrayal he knew, but pushed that thought far from his mind. He could not live and die for her,
not anymore.

Jaime studied the assembly of soldiers and knights, archers and horsemen for several moments before he finally nudged his horse forward, moving along their line of sight, commanding their attention. “Three hundred years ago the kingdoms of this realm united under a single banner. There have been wars and there has been peace, but for three centuries this realm was prosperous. It survived long winters and brief summers,” he spoke, casting his voice across the wide host of men. How many times had he watched his father do this as a boy? How starry eyed was he, before the Battle of the Kingswood, when he had sat atop his horse at the side of Barristan Selmy, a boy and a squire of only six and ten, impassioned by the words of Ser Gerold Hightower when he spoke of honor and justice. Now it was his turn, to speak of things he had once failed to uphold, and to impassion those before him to fight and die and win a promise of peace.

Beneath him the courser stomped at the ground. It was impatient as it sensed the tension on the air. Behind him, Jaime heard the creak and bang of hinges and gears as the Old Gate was opened. The Golden Company would meet them on this battlefield. Many of them would not live to see the sunset, but it was his hope that their plans would hold true and the city would be saved. “You have all come here today,” he continued, “for a dream of spring that we have been denied for too long. Twenty years ago the rule of this land was interrupted. Rightly or wrongly is only for the gods to judge, but for twenty years you have watched as your taxes were squandered and raised unjustly. You have had your lands taken, your crops burned, and your sons have died in the meaningless wars that have plagued this realm since the last true heir to the Iron Throne was struck down at the Trident. Before he rode to war Rhaegar Targaryen promised there would be a change upon his return. He would bring spring to the Seven Kingdoms, and we would know peace and just rule again. For pride and jealousy Robert Baratheon stole that promise. We are here now, on behalf of Rhaegar’s heirs to take it back.” They had spread the truth of Jon Snow through their army, so there could be no question who the men would fight for. That the true heir had bent the knee to the Dragon Queen was also known, and while they could not predict what the rule of House Targaryen would look like once the battle was won, it was secrets that had rent the realm apart and they had chosen truth to bring it back together.

“Many of our Great Houses have been lost to the wars of the Throne,” Jaime stated, “look about you, for you will see their banners missing here. Let the Tyrells of the Reach be remembered this day, and the Martells of Dorne. Remember House Darry of the Crownlands, but more than that, we remember the farmers, the boys, the men, the mothers, and girls, and sisters of the burned homes and villages from Harrenhal to the Twins.” A ripple began to move through the army as the men responded to his call. “You are men of the North,” he watched as they lifted their swords and pikes and called back their presence. “You are the knights of the Mountain and Vale, of the Riverlands,” he nodded to the few that carried the leaping trout of House Tully, tattered and torn, but unfurled from among the men who had come down out of the Riverlands with Marbrand. “You are of the West,” his green eyes burned with pride at the answering roar of the lions, boar, and western houses of his home. “Men of the Crownlands and the Stormlands, all of you have come together, united again under the banner of the Dragon to march through those gates,” he waved his hand in the direction of the city, where the enemy had started taking formation in the shadow of its walls. “We do not come to sack or ruin, we will not destroy or plunder.” He turned his horse forward again and met the gaze of their Queen. “We do not come to conquer this realm,” these were her words, the concession to his command of their army that she had demanded he make known, “we have come to save the realm.”

Drogon’s roar drowned the shouts and cheers of the men. The great beast spread his wings wide and then he leapt, flying straight upward to disappear in the clouds overhead. Jaime rode to the center of the vanguard where Jon joined him. They moved forward together, surrounded by a mix of Lannister and Stark guards, with Ser Addam falling in behind them on his large bay destrier, its coat gleaming
as brightly in the morning sunlight as the burning tree of his House.

They rode out to meet the commander of the Golden Company. “Strickland,” Jaime glared at the man. “There is no need to continue with this fight.”

“Queen Daenerys has commanded that your forces lay down their arms and leave King’s Landing. If you do this,” Jon Snow explained, “you will be allowed to leave Westeros with whatever gold was paid you by the usurper, Lady Baratheon.”

“That isn’t going to happen,” Strickland told them. “The Golden Company has never broken a contract. We were commissioned to fight on behalf of Queen Cersei, of House Lannister, and we shall do that.”

“Well,” Jaime shook his head, “that is going to be a problem. My sweet sister has hired you falsely. I am the Lord of Casterly Rock, head of House Lannister, Lord Paramount of the Westerlands and Warden of the West. Cersei is the widow of Robert Baratheon, former Queen Regent of the Seven Kingdoms. She is a daughter of House Lannister, this is true, but she is now the regent of House Baratheon. House Lannister does not recognize her crown, and we will not honor the contract she has signed for you to fight in our name.”

“Names and Houses, regents and retainers, none of that matters to the Iron Bank once they have received payment,” Strickland informed him. “On behalf of the Queen, if you disband your traitor army they will be allowed to return to their homes. The Lords of the Houses who have come to stand against her will be given the chance to bend the knee and swear oaths of fealty, again. The Commanders will be brought before her to be tried and judged, and given the Queen’s justice.”

“I am well aware of this Queen’s justice,” Jaime’s lip curled. “We will not present ourselves to be butchered by her creature, Ser Gregor Clegane.”

“Know that you had an opportunity to save your men this day,” Jon said, voice thick with disgust and anger. “You chose their fate, not our Queen. Let’s go,” he jerked his horse around and rode back to their army.

They took position at the center of the vanguard, and as each of them drew their swords, Longclaw in Jon’s right hand, and Widow’s Wail in Jaime’s left, they looked to one another and nodded. “It would have been an honor to fight with Rhaegar at the Trident,” Jaime said to him now, “and it was an honor to meet Ned Stark in battle the last time I saw him. I am honored now to fight beside you, my Prince.”

Jon grimaced at the title but nodded. It was not something he thought he would ever be used to, but he had felt the same way about being called King, and Lord Commander before that. These were not titles he had ever aspired to or dreamed of, but they had been placed upon his shoulders and honor compelled him to carry them, proudly, if not gladly. “As am I, Lord Lannister.” The corner of his mouth twitched when the other man winced. He was not the only one struggling under the weight of lofty titles, Jon knew. “Ser Jaime,” he amended.

Jaime bowed his head for just a moment. When he lifted it he cast his attention to the Evenstar and lifted his sword. The arrows of Tarth were drawn. Behind him the Lannister and Northern archers moved forward, stepping into the gaps the soldiers had left for them and moving into position. The commands rang out across the field in the Evenstar’s deep, booming voice. “Nock!”

Beneath him, Jaime’s mount pranced with impatience. He squeezed his thighs against the animal’s sides to hold him steady. His eyes narrowed as he scanned the walls in front of them. The scorpions were pointed to the skies, but the arrows of the archers were trained toward them. They were out of
range, but that would not be the case for much longer.

“Draw!” Bows lifted, light bouncing off the shine of oak, pine, and northern woods the southerners could not name. Silence settled over the field. There was only the huffed breaths of the horses, the shuffling and shuffling of hooves, and the creak of armor to fill the space between anticipation and action.

“Loose!” A cloud of arrows darkened the sky as they flew upward. The army watched, muscles tensing and releasing, quivering at the ready, as the arrows arced and then began to rain down on the foreign enemy in front of them. Men lurched and fell from the walls as the Tarth arrows landed true, and their bows were quickly drawn again.

Above them all there was a screech, and as the arrows flew again, this time aimed at the Scorpions, fire rained down from the sky to blow a hole through the gate and the wall. Drogon banked sharply as bolts flew toward him, then turned and headed southeast toward the bay. The Queen would join the ships from the Stormlands in dealing with the Iron Fleet, now that she had given her army their opening.

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The sounds of battle reached the walls of the Red Keep. From the Street of Steel the smallfolk armed themselves and turned those arms on the Gold Cloaks and Lannister guards that would not lay down arms or join the forces of the Targaryen Queen that had arrived in the city under the cover of darkness. From within the bell towers arrows rained down, protecting those that would fight to free the city from a tyrant’s rule.

There was still panic among the masses, however, and people ran to Visenya’s Hill, where the Sept of Baelor once stood, crying out for help from the Gods. Others ran to the gates of the Red Keep, begging their Queen’s mercy and protection. The gates remained barred and closed, and on the walls of the keep the archers and soldiers stood ready to protect their queen, those who had answered the call. Others had slipped out in the night, some to flee, some to join the Gold Cloaks and guards that would march at the rear of the Golden Company to prevent them retreating back into the city. The rest ushered smallfolk, women and children, old and sick, to the Lion’s Gate at the west of the city. If the city did burn, they would save whom they could.

Inside the walls of the Red Keep, from the darkness of the tunnels and secret passages, Arya Stark led her small host of fighters to deal with the Queen and her Queensguard.

“You’ll have to kill Qyburn first,” Ser Jaime had told her. “I do not trust what commands he would give his little birds. They may try to blow the Keep or the entire city to keep Daenerys and my brother from taking it. Even if she loses, even if she dies my sister will feel triumphant if she can take Tyrion with her. I won’t let that happen.”

“Cersei won’t barricade herself in Maegor’s Holdfast this time,” Tyrion had said. “She will think her army superior by its numbers, so she will want to watch the progress of the battle. She will go to one of the towers, above the Royal Apartments no doubt. They are the tallest of the keep and will allow her to watch her armies crush the Targaryen usurper and her traitor brothers.”

“Wherever Cersei is, the Mountain will be, and no doubt the rest of her Queensguard. The Kettleblacks are decent fighters, but Blount has been with the guard for as long as I was. He will not surrender,” Jaime explained. “You won’t be able to reason with him or turn him. He is a fool, but a loyal one.”

Arya had filed all of their advice to the back of her mind and used it now that it was needed. She
drew needle as they left the passage and made their way past the royal apartments to the tower stairs. She gripped the hilt in her left hand and shared a look with Sandor. He nodded back. They had come this far together.

“What did you tell the God of Death when he came for you at Winterfell?” Clegane reminded her. He had come to kill his brother, and he expected to die doing it, but if he could keep the little she-wolf from getting herself killed while seeking her own revenge, he would.

“Not today.” Her eyes narrowed with determination. “You remember that too,” she ordered him.

“Valar morghulis,” Grey Worm said behind them.

Arya’s mouth curved upward into a smile. “I am not a man. I’m a wolf.” She moved into the shadows of the stairs and with less noise than a gentle summer breeze, she was gone from sight.

From the tower Cersei watched the fires raging at the northern gate. She could hear the sounds of fighting closer than where the Golden Company had gone to meet the usurper army. Her teeth ground together and her lip curled. The traitors would pay for their actions with their lives, those that survived the fighting. She would have their heads on pikes along traitors walk. Of her brothers, the queen, and the bastard Jon Snow, she would mount their heads on her walls and let the crows have their eyes.

“My queen,” Qyburn’s voice sounded behind her. “I think it would be better if we moved you from the tower. We can await news of our army’s success from within the Holdfast.”

“I will not retreat like a common craven,” Cersei spat. “I will watch my army fight for me. They will win. The Lannister soldiers will defeat the turncloak guards of the City’s Watch. The Keep will hold.”

“But your grace,” Qyburn said haltingly, “the Lannister soldiers are fighting each other. My little birds have had reports that the traitors gained our walls in the night. The Lannister army was passed a message from your brother, the false Warden of the West, that any of his men that laid down their arms in surrender would be granted their lives. Any who chose to fight for his queen would be allowed to retain their titles and any lands or monies.”

“My brother,” she seethed. Her lips pulled back from her teeth in a cruel smile. “That little beast will be the first that I execute, as I should have done long ago.” She should have smothered him in his crib, or drowned him as a child. He should not have been allowed to grow to adulthood, to shame their family and name.

Qyburn lowered his gaze when she looked at him. “It was not Lord Tyrion,” he said quietly, carefully, lest he tempt his queen’s rage toward him. “It was Ser Jaime, your grace. He has been named Lord of Casterly Rock… and given all of your late father’s titles as his heir. He is fighting with the traitor army,” Qyburn reported, and felt a small thrill at the way her eyes widened and she seemed to shrink in defeat. “I am told they fly the Lannister standard, and the reinforcements we were expecting from the West have joined him to fight for the Targaryen invader. His men have rallied to his side, my Queen, not to ours.”

Before she could respond there was a crash outside the door, followed by the clang of steel and the sounds of men fighting and dying. Cersei glowered at her Hand and Master of Whispers. “Has your incompetence allowed this betrayal to reach our walls?”

The door was busted inward. Men with spears poured into the room, followed by what appeared to be a girl. Behind her, standing near as tall as the Mountain himself was another man, and though
Qyburn did not know him, the scars on his face gave away his identity. “Ser Gregor, protect your queen!”

“Dovaogędy,” Grey Worm jerked his head at three of his men and they moved into flanking position to surround the Mountain as the Hound moved forward to engage him. He had planned to help kill the creature that had killed Missandei, but his Queen had commanded that he stay with Arya Stark, who was blood of her blood, and assist with killing or capturing the usurper, Cersei.

Arya walked forward slowly. Her eyes swept over the woman that she had long hoped to see again, to finally cross this name from her list for the crimes she had committed against her family. “Do you know who I am?”

“A common street urchin?” Cersei sneered at her. “Another Essosi whore? What does it matter? You will not survive this day. You will pay for this insolence.” Even as the Clegane brothers met in battle and the Unsullied guards herded them away from the tower room to the corridor beyond, Cersei would not believe in her own defeat. She had other Queensguard, soldiers and men who would remain loyal to her. They would come, she was sure of it.

“You’re not as golden as you used to be,” Arya remarked. She tilted her head to one side and held Needle in front of her, its thin, sharp tip pointed at the throat of the older woman as she slowly circled her and the man beside her. “When I was little I had never seen anything more beautiful, more golden and shining than the day you came to our home. I almost believed in the songs and stories that my sister loved so much. Almost,” she clarified. “I realized very soon that the beauty was just another kind of armor but it didn’t protect anything. Instead it hid something else, something dark and ugly, and dangerous. I told myself, as my family died because of your lies, and cruelty, and greed, that I would get to be the one that made you pay; you and your precious, twisted Joffrey. Always Joffrey first, though, I wanted you to watch that. I wanted you to see it with your own eyes.” Arya stopped in front of her again. “The way my sister saw our father lose his head. The way you watched when Joffrey had her beaten every time our brother, Robb, defeated your pathetic Lannister army, the same way my brother Jon and your brother Jaime are defeating your army now.” A small, cruel smile curved her lips. “Do you know who I am now?”

“You’re lying,” Cersei whispered. At her sides her hands tingled. She stared at the girl before her, heart beating quickly. It could not be. It was a ploy, a deception created by the traitors, no doubt the idea of her disgusting little brother. “All of the Starks are dead except for that traitorous bitch, Sansa, and the worthless bastard, Jon Snow, and I will have both of their heads soon enough.”

Arya hummed. “I don’t think so.” Her brow arched. “I am Arya Stark of Winterfell, and you will surrender to me now, to be held for trial for the crimes you have committed against House Stark, the peoples of King’s Landing, and the Seven Kingdoms.”

“If you do not,” Grey Worm informed her, “then on behalf of the rightful Queen, Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, we will kill you here for your crimes…” His lip curled. “And the murder of Missandei of Naath.”

“Qyburn,” Cersei jerked her head at him. The wolf would not take the lion, and the foreign scum brought to her lands by a usurper queen, whose House had devolved into madness, would not defeat her.

From within the dark, billowing folds of his robes, the disgraced Maester and Hand drew a long, curved dagger. He lunged toward the girl, quickly judging her the weakest of the pair. Arya stepped to one side, easily out of his path. She pivoted gracefully and brought her left arm up. With a flick of her wrist Qyburn fell, clutching at his throat as his life’s blood spilled forward. When she faced Cersei again, her arms were once more clasped behind her back, needle still held firmly between her
hands, and a placid expression on her face. “I asked you a question, and I am still waiting for an answer.”

Cersei stared at Qyburn’s gasping, shuddering body until it went still. The smell of death filled the room. She cast a desperate look toward the battle raging outside the tower room in time to watch Ser Gregor fall to his knees with a spear buried deep in his back. She felt her stomach clench and her heart drop as the Hound, wounded and bloodied, lifted his large ax and brought it down on her guard’s head. Cersei’s eyes closed and she drew a shuddering breath. Her hands moved to her stomach and she thought of the life within. She felt the bitter ache of defeat in the sting of tears behind her eyes. Cersei lifted her chin and as she exhaled slowly, she opened her eyes. She stared hard at the girl in front of her. “By no right,” she ground out, “does the Wolf judge the Lion.” She bared her teeth again, in hate and defiance. “If my brothers and their Targaryen whore want my head then they can look me in the eye before they take it, but I will not kneel to you.”

“You will kneel before the dragon,” Grey Worm told her, “and it is not your head we take. We will burn you, and let the wind scatter your ashes to nothing so that you are forgotten by history.” He held his spear tightly in one hand as he walked forward. He curled his other hand tightly around her upper arm. “Dovaogêdy,” he called to his brothers. The unsullied, many of them injured, but still armed and standing proudly, filled the room again. They surrounded the queen, their spears turned inward, and guided her forward.

Arya watched them go. It had been decided that she would not be held in the Keep. It was too great a risk for someone who had lived there for the greater part of her life. There were too many passageways and they could not trust that she would not find her way out, or that someone would not find a way to get a weapon or poison to her before the trial and judgment could take place. She would be taken away from the Red Keep instead, back through the tunnels and out of the city. They would hold her in their camp, heavily guarded, and to be called for only when it was time to do so.

She let out a breath she had not realized she was holding as they left her sight. Arya felt her shoulders slump a bit. It was not over, not truly, but the shadow of Cersei had been darkening her life for so long that she felt some relief at having finally faced her. She wondered if Sansa would feel the same way, when her day to stand before the former Queen finally arrived, and if closing this chapter in their lives might break down some of the walls that her sister had built around herself.

Arya wiped the blood from Needle before sheathing it and walked out of the room. She found the Hound leaning against the wall near his brother’s fallen body. He was breathing heavily and clutching his side. Arya’s brows rose. “Are you injured or dying?”

He scowled at her in response. “What fucking difference does it make? I finally killed my brother, you captured Cersei, and that’s the first thing you say to me? Am I injured or dying?”

Arya shrugged at him. “If you’re injured I’ll go and find you help, if you’re dying I’ll just leave you here. It’s not over yet; I’ve got things to do. So which is it?”

Clegane drew his hand away from his side and straightened. His brother had sliced him in a few places but he didn’t think any of them were deep enough to be more than an annoyance. “You’re still a great fucking pain in my ass, that’s which one it is,” he grumbled. “I don’t need your help, girl, I can manage.”

She fought the urge to smile as she shrugged again. “Okay then.” Arya walked past him to the stairs. When he didn’t follow her, she cast a look back. “Are you going to help me finish taking the Keep or stay here pouting like the miserable old shit you are?”

“One of these days girl,” he waved his ax at her in a promise as he limped toward the stairs.
“You’re always saying that,” Arya reminded him, and continued walking down the stairs. “But it never happens. I think it’s time to finally face the facts. You like me too much.”

“I do not,” he snarled.

“You do,” she said, “it’s okay to admit it. There’s no one around to hear it.”

“Just shut the fuck up,” he growled, his voice ringing back up the stairs behind them. “Let’s just go and take the bloody Keep and get it over with.”

As they continued down the stairs, Arya considered how close they were to a journey they had both started long ago. “Sandor, do you know what’s west of Westeros?”

“No,” he cast an uncertain and half annoyed look at her from the corner of his eye. “Why would I know that? It’s where all the maps stop.”

“That’s my point,” she said. “When this is all over, and everything is settled, I’m going to go and find out.” She looked up at him. “Want to go with me?”

Clegane shrugged. A sigh shuddered out of him that was all fatigue, pain, and feigned resignation. “I guess you’ll annoy me every day if I don’t?” He shook his head at her. “Fine. You don’t know how to stay out of trouble,” he grumbled at her, “someone should go along that knows what a great pain in the ass you are.”

Arya fought a smile as they made their way down the stairs. Maybe she would see if Gendry wanted to go too. She knew Daenerys had made him the new Lord of Storm’s End, and he would be a good lord, if that were what he wanted. Arya didn’t think he did, though. That wasn’t him. Just like she wasn’t a Lady. Maybe they could get Hot Pie to go with them too, a ship needed a cook, she thought. They would ask anyone else who didn’t feel like they belonged in any one place.

For the first time in a long time, despite the battle raging all around them, Arya felt like she had something to look forward to rather than the promise of revenge to hold her back.

Chapter End Notes

Can’t you see it? Not that I’m saying this is how it goes for them, but for the sake of imagination: Arya & Gendry out exploring the world with grumpy old Uncle Sandor, while Hot Pie figures out new and interesting ways to bake him chickens. I can’t help it, that amuses me to no end.

I agree, the heraldry of war may be a bit corny. Tropes galore, but I love my Jaime. I also might have been watching LOTR when I wrote this particular chapter and was like “ooh, he needs a speech, ok!”

Thank you all again, all who have been commenting & leaving kudos. You rock! :)
Is This Victory?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Iron Fleet was burning in the bay. There were fires in the city from the fighting that had broken out in the streets. An entire city block had been destroyed by the ignition of a small cache of wildfire, proving Ser Jaime’s tale to be true. In all, it was not the destruction of the city that could have taken place under far worse circumstances. Guards were quickly dispatched to deal with the fires as the army swept into King’s Landing. The Golden Company was defeated, its soldiers dead or captured. There had been casualties among their own armies, as was expected, but it could have been worse, much, much worse.

Daenerys chose not to land Drogon within the city walls. She had seen the wildfire eruption from the sky, and would not risk an accident destroying her people. She landed near her army’s camp and waited for her commanders to join her there with news of their victory. They would ride into the city together.

She waited in the tent that had been Jon’s, before the decision was made for her to stay in the camp and he moved to another, smaller tent nearby. They had not passed the night together since those first hours she spent with him within those canvas walls. He needed space to try and come to terms with all the changes that had happened in his life of late, and though it pained her greatly, and the distance gave voice to the doubts in her mind, Daenerys gave him that space.

She found solace that her actions of late had created a new sense of confidence in her among her advisors and commanders. Daenerys reminded herself of all the times she felt fear in Viserys’s presence, how often she had acquiesced to his wishes and anger for the sake of not waking the dragon. She wanted her people to respect her, as their queen, as their savior, and as the last dragon. She wanted them to know that betrayal would be met with only the most dire of consequences, that a woman could be as cunning and ruthless as any man. She never wanted to be feared, not the kind of fear she had seen in the eyes of the Westerosi men in camp when she had landed that night. She had known when they refused to meet her gaze, to even look on her, flinching away from her when her eyes fell on them that they had heard of what had befallen Lord Varys.

She had burned him for his betrayal, but he had been warned. Daenerys regretted only that she had done it when her heart had been so filled with anger and grief, not when her mind was clear and she could feel only the regret and sorrow of losing someone she had once trusted. She would need to find a better way, a way to balance the dragon and the queen, to be the ruler that her people needed. She could almost hear the soft lilt of Ser Jorah’s voice in her mind. “You have a gentle heart, Khaleesi.”

Daenerys sighed. “Not so gentle anymore, my bear,” she murmured quietly. She poured herself a cup of wine from a jug on a small table in the corner and took a seat at the table that had been used for all their planning, plans that had been reviewed just that morning, hours before. The Queen stared at all of the plans and maps, covered with markers and notes, and lines drawn to indicate host movements, but she saw none of it. She felt the loss of Ser Jorah more keenly in that moment than she had since the hours just following the battle at Winterfell. Would that he was there with her, to help guide her in these hard and troubled times. She felt so alone now, without Jorah or Missandei. There was only Grey Worm left, of those who had been with her since before she began taking cities and trying to live up to her name as the Breaker of Chains.

Tyrion had joined them in Meereen, that was true, and for a long while she had considered him
another gift that her Great Bear had given her, but lately... Daenerys closed her eyes. There had been so many mistakes and it was hard to know if they were just miscalculations on his part or if his loyalties were truly in question. She wanted to believe, so very much, that the man who had looked on her with such emotion in his eyes when she had named him Hand of the Queen was still her truest and wisest advisor. It was just so hard to see sometimes, when there was his sister and his brother, and all the ghosts of the life he once had in Westeros to get in the way.

He looked on her with such longing, though, that it pained Daenerys to know that he had begun to doubt her as much as she doubted him. He wanted to believe in her again, she could see that in his mismatched gaze, and he wanted to trust her, but there was fear that he tried to hide when he was in her presence. Daenerys lifted the wine to her lips and drank deeply. His faith in her had seemed renewed these past few days, although he was cautious in her presence. Perhaps one day soon they would both find their faith in each other fully renewed, for she was truly fond of the little man.

She hoped that when the battle was won, and the city was safe, and they could begin rebuilding this land that she was meant to rule that they would see that she was not mad. She was not! She would break the wheel, and they would help her, and none of them would ever have to be frightened again.

Her mind turned to the new people in her life. The Kingslayer and the Evenstar. They both presented a bit of a conundrum. She did not trust Ser Jaime Lannister, and she liked him even less. He was charismatic, to be sure, but something in his attitude set her teeth on edge. She did not have to like him, however, to be able to use his counsel. The trust was a bigger issue. He was still the man who had killed her father, the man whose sister sat on her throne, the same woman who had birthed his bastard children and attempted to use them to usurp the throne from another usurper. Her earliest memories were those of the stories that her brother had told her, all of them revolving around the different ways in which they would make the Kingslayer pay for his crimes against their family.

Now she learned that was all a lie. He had killed her father, but apparently it had been necessary to stop an even greater madness. He was known as the Mad King. There were too many others that could corroborate that much, and even Ser Barristan had admitted that her father was not a truly good and just ruler. There were too many stories, too many terrible crimes committed by her father in the name of his crown for her to be able to ignore what he had been. She did not want to be that, just as she had not wanted to be like Viserys.

The Kingslayer would need to be pardoned, if he did not yet betray her. It was the right and honorable thing to do. But he would prove himself first, on that she would not budge.

Then there was the Evenstar, and his apparent lineage. There was still a small part of her that wondered if that was some sort of trickery, but she could not ignore or deny what she saw with her own eyes. His appearance could have been the result of an Essosi ancestor, but there was too much in his face that reminded her of Viserys. He was taller and broader than her brother had been, and his face had aged into harder lines, but she could see the resemblance and that was enough to convince her.

He spoke to her with such boldness, this bastard uncle she had never known of before, although, in truth, he seemed to speak to everyone that way. Daenerys felt a small smile pull her lips upward as she considered that he did not spare his tongue for the Kingslayer either, nor Jon, nor Tyrion, any of them, really. The only one he seemed to give any deference too was Ser Davos, who he appeared to know and respect. Daenerys made a mental note to ask after them, she would have that story.

“Make way!” The sound of shouts and commotion at the entrance to the tent had Daenerys rising in concern. Several men pushed their way inside, but even as she reached for the dagger that was sheathed at her thigh, beneath the long flowing lines of her thick, wool and leather jerkin, Daenerys
realized that they were carrying a body.

“Jon!” Her eyes widened as the four men, one of them a Westerlands Knight, Ser Addam, carried the injured man to the cot. “What happened?” She demanded, eyes narrowing in concern and suspicion.

“Forgive us, Your Grace,” Ser Davos was with them too. He had followed quickly behind the others. “We thought we might have more room in this tent for the healers.” He moved around the other men, even as he spoke, and began loosening his Lord’s armor and leathers.

“My Queen,” Ser Addam bowed his head to her. “Lord Snow was injured in the city. We were commanded to bring him back here, as quickly as possible. We thought it might be the safest place until we know the city is fully secured.”

“How was he injured?” she asked, teeth clenched tightly.

“Euron Greyjoy, your grace.” Addam sighed. “He took a spear and helm from one of the dead Essosi. It was how he was able to get close enough before we realized he was not dressed in the leathers of your Unsullied.”

Her eyes narrowed while her mouth pressed into a thin, angry line. “I destroyed Greyjoy’s fleet myself, his was the first ship that I burned. How did he manage to get into the city?”

“Apparently the rat jumped ship before it went up in flames,” Davos replied. He grimaced as he took in the damage to Jon’s side. “It was a glancing blow. It will need to be cleaned and stitched, but it does not look too bad.” He reached toward the back of the unconscious man’s head and felt for damage there. “The men say he hit his head when he fell from his horse, but I do not feel any breaks. There’s a bump alright, but I figure he’s had worse.”

Daenerys took a moment to feel relief at that before her harsh gaze was leveled on Ser Addam again. “What of your Kingslayer? Did he not swear an oath to protect his Prince? Where was he when Euron Greyjoy was attempting to murder my Warden of the North? Or is he completely incapable of fulfilling even a single vow?”

A muscle in Addam’s cheek twitched, and his jaw clenched, but he swallowed back the frustration and anger at the insult to his liege Lord. “It was Ser Jaime that killed Greyjoy,” he told her, “and commanded us to return with Lord Snow and stay with him until he returned, or until Lord Snow’s own men-at-arms were present to be with him. Ser Jaime was also injured by Greyjoy, before he put his sword through his gut and left him to die in the street like the gutter rat he was. My Lord remained in the city, however, in command of Her Grace’s army, to see the battle won.”

“I see.” Daenerys took a breath and forced herself to calm. She had once again allowed her emotions to simmer to close to the surface. She let her gaze drop to Jon again before she nodded. “Thank you, Ser Addam.” She would not apologize for having been overly harsh, but her tone did soften. “You have my gratitude for all that your men have done here this day. Please,” she waved her hand to the opening of the tent, “do as your Lord commanded.”

“Your grace,” Addam nodded to her before turning back to Davos. “I will send someone to see where Ser Denys is with that maester.”

“No.” Jon grunted from the bed. He tried to rise but a hand pushed him firmly backward. He groaned in pain. “There are more seriously wounded than I. Boil it out with wine and bandage it. I can wait for a maester.” He had come to with a headache pounding behind his eyes. He ground his teeth together at the sharp pain in his side. “Seven fucking hells.”
“Jon, you were stabbed.” Daenerys moved closer to the bed so that she might meet his gaze. “It may be more serious than it looks.”

“It’s not.” His lips pulled back from his teeth in a grimace. “Been stabbed before.” Jon looked up at her and jerked his shoulder, a bit sheepishly, “a lot worse than this, too.”

“Aye,” Davos reminded him, “and we’ve no Red Witch to bring you back from your own stupidity,” he paused a moment before adding, “my lord.”

Daenerys folded her lips together to suppress her amusement. If Davos was grousing at him it could not truly be that serious. “Thank you, Ser Addam,” she said by way of dismissal.

“I think I’ll go and see to that boiled wine,” Davos rose from the edge of the cot, “try not to get stabbed again while I’m gone,” he grumbled.

Jon scowled at his back as he left, then he sighed and turned his gaze on his queen. “Do you remember when people didn’t talk to us like we’re a couple of idiot children?”

“Hm.” She hummed as she sat beside him on the cot. “I’m not certain that I do, but it surely must be true for I am a queen and you were a king.”

“I think that might make it worse.” He shifted on the cot and winced again. “My head is ringing, and not from hitting it on the ground. I thought I’d heard some things on the Wall, but nay, there’s nothing like an enraged lion to split your pounding head right open.” He laid his head back and tried to smile at her, but it was more of a grimace. “I am, apparently, a thrice-damned honorable fool worse than both my fathers, and if I get him burned alive or fed to that…” Jon frowned as he tried to remember the exact wording, “great bloody scaled beast by getting myself maimed or killed, he is going to do everything in his power to make sure the Stranger leaves him tied to this world so that he can personally haunt me for the rest of his days.” Jon gave her a beseeching look. “By the gods, Dany, that’s a worse punishment than I could take, let the man live.”

She snorted a quiet laugh and reached out to lay her hand against his forehead. She let it slide to his cheek and rest there. “Perhaps we shall send for our cousin as he only seems to remember his place or be in good humor when she is about.” She bent low while her eyes glittered deviously. “Of course, we could also just remind him that it is, in fact, our cousin whose good favor he would like to remain in.”

“I do not think I had fully appreciated that fact,” Jon realized, “that Ser Brienne is not only your cousin but mine as well. It’s odd, isn’t it, how things work out? Call it the fates, the gods, whatever you like, but they brought our cousin to protect my sisters… well cousins actually, but it is somehow to my family that she is sworn, and yet it is the Kingslayer to whom she is bound. It is odd, right? Or is my head more damaged than I thought? Bran kept saying we all had parts to play, but now I think I’m starting to believe it. We have all of us been connected in one way or another.”

“It is,” she agreed, “very odd, and a bit troubling too.” Her head tilted and she moved her fingers into his hair, gently stroking the soft, but sweat dampened curls. “And it is okay if you call them your sisters, Jon, for that is what they were and how you think of them, so that is what they are. I’m not angry because you care for them. I wish they did not dislike me so, but they are still blood of my blood,” she said, laying her other hand against his chest, above his heart. “Family is very important, Jon. For the longest time all I had was Viserys, and then there were my children and my Khalisar, and Ser Jorah, and Missandei. Now they are all mostly gone. There are but few people remaining who are dear to me, and I would not take yours from you. I wish you could believe that.”

“I do, Dany,” he said thickly. Jon wrapped his hand around hers and drew her fingers to his lips. “I
truly do,” he promised her. “I am not happy with Sansa, and I will have that talk with her, but we have fought before and been stronger for it. What she told Tyrion was not her secret to tell, but I do not think she did it for malice or betrayal. It is not her way. She was scared, Dany, I know she was.” He closed his eyes and sighed again. “The two of you are so alike, maybe that’s why you do not get along. I had hoped…”

He was alone at the Wall for so long; he tried so hard to fulfill his duty to the Night’s Watch while one by one his family had fallen. He had lost them all, uncle Benjen, his father, Bran and Rickon, or so he had thought, and no one had known Arya’s fate. He had thought her dead too, and then Robb was slain, and even Lady Catelyn; that had pained him as well, for all that she had never cared for him she was still mother to his brothers and sisters. When he thought he could bear no more, he had heard that Sansa had disappeared too. He was truly a wolf alone in the world then, or he thought he was, and then Ser Brienne had brought Sansa back to him. He had her back, and she was never the littlest, or the kindest, or even seemed to like him at all, but he had clung to her and she to him, and Jon swore he would never let her go again. In that moment she became the most important person in his life, but then he had fallen in love with Daenerys, and he hoped the two of them might like each other for they were both strong, and proud, and women to be respected.

“I would say that fire and ice are not meant to mingle, but that wouldn’t be entirely true,” she smiled gently, sadly at him. “You are here, and you are of both.” She closed her fingers around his and held his hand tightly. “Your sister does not trust me, and I truly do not trust her, but perhaps when the fighting is done and there is peace we can try again. I would do that for you, Jon Snow.”

“I would be grateful.” He smiled warmly at her. “And I don’t know that I am of ice. I’m part wolf, aye, but try lying next to Ghost, even when the ground beneath you is solid ice. He’s right hot-blooded that one, and he knows it too.”

Her quiet laugh filled the tent. “You will see him again, Jon. I would not chain you to the south.” Daenerys bent down to press her lips to his and no sooner had than she heard a throat being cleared behind them.

Jon shared a look with her when they glanced over to find Ser Davos scowling at them. “Idiot children,” they both muttered. Movement at the old knight’s shoulder drew both their attention, however, and Daenerys straightened at the sight of Grey Worm.

“What has happened?” She asked him, almost fearing the answer.

“Emi ěrinnon ŋuha dāria,” he told her. “We have won.” Grey Worm moved more fully into the tent and bowed his head to her. “My Queen, the throne is yours. Missandei of Naath is avenged.”

Jon squeezed the hand he held more tightly. “And my sister? What of Arya?” If the Mountain was dead, and Grey Worm was returned, was the Red Keep truly theirs? If it was, what had become of Cersei, and where was Arya?

“Lady Arya and The Hound stayed to help secure the castle,” he replied. “I left many of my fighters with them, and much of our army has already arrived to help.” His eyes burned with a continued promise of vengeance as he looked at his queen. “Cersei is our prisoner. She is guarded here, by many Unsullied and Dothraki. My Queen will have justice.”

Daenerys rose slowly. “You have honored me greatly this day, my dear friend, my bravest soldier. I am more grateful than I can say. For Missandei she will be tried and all will know of her crimes and that her punishment is both just and merciful.”

Grey Worm nodded once and then left the tent to see to the rest of his men and gather more reports.
of the fighting in the city.

Davos moved back to the cot with the bandages and wine he had brought with him. “Ser Jaime also sent a rider back with news,” he told them. “The fires are mostly contained, and regrettable though they were, there were a few. It will be a few days before we have a full count of casualties, but the maesters and healers in the city are already setting up for the wounded. Most of the Lannister army laid down their arms or joined us, as we hoped they would, we fought the rest.” As he spoke, he poured the wine onto the wound and grimaced in sympathy when Jon jolted and groaned. He still thought it would need stitches, but that could wait for a maester. “He also suggested you might want to wait a couple of days before you actually take the throne, he’s organizing the men he trusts most, from both the Westerlands forces and the Northmen to go through the Red Keep level by level, room by room and make sure that Cersei and Qyburn didn’t leave any unpleasant surprises behind.”

“That’s it then?” Daenerys looked between the two men. “We have truly won? Is it really over?”

“Over?” Davos shook his head at her. “No, Your Grace, it’s far from over. It’s only just beginning. Winning a throne is only half the battle. Now you’ve got to rule from it. Getting it is the easy part, it’s the rest that’s hard.”

“It really is,” she agreed. “I will leave you to tend Lord Snow. I should go and find Lord Tyrion and check in with the others.”

“I’ll find you soon,” Jon promised her. When Davos frowned at him, he scowled back. “It’s not that bad,” he argued, even as Dany left them. “It’s barely a scratch!”

“Oh yes, because what would I know of injuries,” Davos muttered, “I’ve only had a few dozen and lived to tell about it, mostly because I did as I was told, that’s how I got to be such a ripe old…”

“Age,” Jon echoed, and then rolled his eyes. “I won’t move around too much, but I should be seen. It isn’t a mortal wound. I know a little bit about those,” he reminded the older man.

“Very well,” he conceded. “I can pack it to help stop the bleeding, but it will need stitches. The maester will want to boil it out again before he puts thread to it.”

Jon nodded, in short jerky movements because it really did hurt like all seven of the hells. His head was still pounding too, but he couldn’t lie there while the rest of his men cleaned up after their battle. Victory or no, there was still work to be done.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

I do not think Dany was mad, or even showing the signs of it at the beginning of Season 8. If that was the endgame all along, then they should have stretched it out much, much further. Look at Cersei, who was so deliciously ruthless and manipulative, but we got to see her descent into madness over several seasons, and it was so beautifully portrayed.

With Dany, I felt she was impetuous, too prone to rash behavior with her moods, and she made mistakes - but she was human, and a young ruler, and there was room to grow. I thought her only mistake with Varys, who did betray her, and was warned about that, was carrying out her justice while she was so filled with rage and grief.
I even think they (S8 destroyers) screwed Varys over. I didn't think his descent into suspicion was at all IC, but that's just me.

The first rule of punishment that I was taught was never to do it while angry. That mistake did not make her "mad" IMHO. It made the Season 8 writing... questionable. :)

I must thank you all again for all the comments and kudos. This fandom is so amazing!
Speaking of Brienne, I thought it was time to check in on those left in the North. How I envision her relationship with Sansa is probably idealized, but I don’t care. I’ll go down with that boat.

The truth is, even in this medieval setting, I had so many issues with how they portrayed relationships between women. Why do they so often have to be rivals? Why must a woman willing to fight for herself, her home, her family, and her people be seen as a cold fish? Imagine the world they’d have if Dany, Sansa, Brienne, Arya, Yara, Meera And even little Lyanna Giantslayer Mormont had teamed up. But I get it. It’s all medieval and about the dudes and their bromances.... and while I do love a good bromance (Jon and Tormund yo!) my head has room for more.

They might have defeated the army of the dead, but winter was still upon them, and there was much to do at Winterfell to prepare for the worst of it. There were still long, cold days to come, and even longer nights. The deepest of the snows had not yet arrived, but would in the coming months. Their stores were sorely depleted following the battle against the dead, and the castle still had far to go before it was repaired. There were few survivors remaining, most of the Northern Houses had been wiped out. Cerwyn, Manderly, Karstark, Umber, they were all but gone. There were cousins and bastards, but the families Sansa and her siblings had grown up knowing were no more.

Even before the Long Night had come upon them many of their bannermen had ridden south with Robb and been lost in the fighting or the Red Wedding. Rebuilding the north would take many years, but Sansa knew that her people were up to the task. The north was different than the rest of Westeros. They were a stronger, harder people, and more loyal by far than most Sansa had met in the south.

Difficult tasks lay before them, but Sansa felt oddly energized by the work that greeted her each day. There were the wounded to care for, which she left in the capable hands of Samwell Tarly and his free folk wife, Gilly. To be honest, Gilly had been a great help in organizing the women and children to the tasks of each day. There were lessons to be organized, clothing to be made or mended, and lists upon lists of supplies to be laid in for the days when the snows would be piled too deeply for anyone to safely travel far beyond Winterfell’s walls.

The free folk knew a lot about surviving in the harsh conditions of the north. As the days grew colder Sansa was grateful that Tormund and his people had remained at Winterfell while they waited for word of the war in the south. He also had people that needed to heal and rest before making the long journey back to Castle Black. They would go, when it was safe to do so, but in the meantime they helped with the hunting and curing of meat and the finding of seeds and green foods that could be grown in Winterfell’s glass houses – once those structures were fully repaired.
Sansa had put the repair of the glass houses near the top of the list of what was most needed in the aftermath of the Long Night. Growing food, herbs, and medicinal plants would keep her people alive during the long winter. The walls were also being repaired, as she knew only too well the necessity of security while the realm was in upheaval. There were weapons and armor to be mended, and Sansa was thankful that Gendry had stayed behind to help organize the smiths. She knew he would have liked to go with Arya, but whatever had happened between her sister and the young, newly legitimized lord after the victory feast had made keeping him at Winterfell much easier than she expected.

She thought of all those things as she walked the battlements of her home. Sansa came to a stop near the East Gate and looked down into the field outside the castle’s walls. This is where the men and women, boys and girls, gathered each day for training. Normally that training would have taken place in the courtyard inside the walls, but with the repairs underway Ser Brienne had cautioned that it was better to gather elsewhere. Sansa let her gaze sweep the groups of training men and women. It was the children now, those aged ten to fifteen, under the careful tutelage of Ser Kendrick Thorngoode, one of the knights of the Vale who had survived the battle against the dead. Those older than fifteen, well enough to train, were supervised during the morning hours by Ser Brienne.

“He’s getting better,” Sansa said quietly, a note of pride in her tone when she nodded to the group of ten and eleven year olds that Podrick Payne was guiding through parrying exercises while Ser Kendrick worked with the older children.

“He is.” Brienne watched proudly as Podrick corrected the stance and grip of a young, redheaded boy she believed to be the Karstark bastard. They expected he would be legitimized when the rule of the Kingdoms was decided, if things went in their favor. Brienne wouldn’t let herself think about that, however, not while a smile was trying to pull the corners of her mouth upward. “He still lunges when he shouldn’t,” she commented, ever suffering at her squire’s bad habits, “but he’s done well.”

“You will have to knight him soon,” Sansa reminded her. She cast a glance to the woman standing at her side. “He has more than earned it, I think.” She fought the urge to smile when she heard the other woman sigh.

“I suppose he has.” He fought well and bravely in the battle, and had saved her life and the life of others more than once. Podrick had proven to be a true and loyal squire. “I will see it done soon.”

She sounded all too reluctant about it. Sansa arched a brow at her. “You’re not growing sentimental on me, are you Ser Brienne?”

Brienne schooled her face into a bland, expressionless mask. “Certainly not, my lady.” But at the
teasing sparkle in her lady’s eyes, the mask melted away to reveal her own small smile. “Perhaps just
a bit.” She looked down at Podrick again. “It will be difficult to part with him.”

“You needn’t worry,” Sansa folded her hands in front of her as she turned away from the East Gate
and began walking again, Brienne falling in step with her once more. “We shall find you another
squire.”

“You will not,” Brienne parried back, “it was difficult enough breaking all of Podrick’s bad habits. I
can’t imagine having to do that again. I managed quite well without a squire for some time, I can do
so again.” She nodded once, as though finalizing the matter entirely.

“Yes, I do believe you are going entirely sentimental on me,” Sansa decided. The scowl she was
greeted with made her eyes sparkle in the gray winter light. “I will simply have to see what I can do
to find you a suitable squire to replace our young Podrick once he is knighted. I was thinking that
Jorelle Mormont might be a suitable choice. Bear Island is currently in the capable hands of the
Steward and Maester that Lady Lyanna left behind when she brought her forces to Winterfell. The
ladies of Bear Island have long had a history of being warriors, especially those of House Mormont,
but there is no one left to teach young Lady Jory.”

It was another House that would need to be rebuilt, but luckily Bear Island had been far from the
threat of the Night King and his army, although the War of the Five Kings and the Red Wedding had
taken its toll prior to the Battle of the Bastards and the Long Night. “Lady Maegedied fighting for my
brother Robb,” she explained for Brienne’s benefit, “her daughter and heir Dacey was murdered at
the Red Wedding with my brother and lady mother. Alysane Mormont and her husband were lost
attempting to defend the North against the Greyjoyinvasion, and their children are barely more than
babes. No one has seen Lyra since the last Ironborn reavings. Lady Lyanna was the youngest, and
Jory isn’t much older. She was betrothed to a son of House Cerwyn and fostered there, allowing the
rule of House Mormont to pass to her sister, but now considering everything…” Sansa trailed off
with a sigh. The son to whom Jorelle had been betrothed had perished fighting against the dead. “I
thought to foster her here,” she continued. “As the new Lady of House Mormontshe will need to
learn how to rule, but she should also learn how to fight.” Sansa stopped walking and turned to face
her sworn protector. “I can think of no one better and I believe that Lady Maege would have
approved.”

Brienne was silent for a moment before she nodded. “I would like to think so as well,” she said, both
proud and touched at her Lady’s trust of her abilities. “I remember Lady Maege from my short time
with your mother in the Riverlands. She was a strong woman, and a true warrior. So was her
daughter, Lady Dacey. I would be honored to take Lady Jorelle into my service until she comes of
age.”

“Thank you, Ser.” Sansa nodded before they began walking again. “That brings me to another
matter, one we have not discussed before. You are the heir to your own house, and I thought it
important that you know I have not forgotten, nor have I ignored that fact. I know your duty to your people will one day take you from my side, and though that day will grieve me greatly, I understand the necessity. I will hate to see you go, but you will always be welcome here.” Too many people had come and gone in her life since the day she first left Winterfell, but of those who had stayed at her side, there was no one outside her family that Sansa trusted more. “You have been more than my protector,” Sansa told her, “you have kept my secrets, aided my cause, and guided me through one of the darkest periods of my life. I count you as a trusted friend. You must know that.” Only Brienne, and later Maester Wolkan, had seen the damage that Ramsay had done to her body. Brienne had cared for her wounds during the journey to Castle Black, and continued to do so until it became necessary to send Brienne south to treat with the Blackfish.

It was difficult to speak past the emotion that was swelling in her chest and constricting her throat. “I do, my lady,” she managed at last. She had intended only to save the girl, to fulfill her oath to Lady Catelyn, to do at least that one thing right. Brienne had never planned to care for the young woman she had sworn herself to. “I feel much the same. There will come a day,” she agreed, and the thought of it made her stomach twist painfully, “and I do not look forward to it. Until then, I am where I feel that I am most needed. I will continue to serve you, as I always have, until duty and honor compel me to take my place on Tarth.”

“I know that you will.” Sansa allowed another small smile before schooling her face into her Lady’s mask. “It was important, with everything that has happened, that I speak those words. I know there are still many things we do not know, and it can feel as though our world here is far apart from what is happening in the South, but we may have more battles to come. You have served House Stark and the North well, and when you return to the Stormlands I would consider you our strongest and closest ally in the Southronkingdoms. Until that day comes, and I hope it to be very far in the future, we have much work to do.”

“Indeed we do,” Brienne agreed. “I have spoken with Lord Gendry, and in addition to the weapons that are being repaired in the forge, he has set the smiths to the metal work for the wall supports and gates. Maester Wolkan is overseeing the planting in the Glass gardens, and Samwell has put Gilly and the women of the free folk to work creating medicines we will need for the winter. They know ways of preserving the herbs even in the harshest of snow falls.”

“Those in the closest keeps are returning to their lands, but the rest will winter here,” Sansa explained. “It would be too dangerous to send them on their way now. As terrible as I expect winter to be, it does have its advantages, should the fighting in the south end badly, the southerners will not march north and if they do, the snow will protect us.” She glanced at Brienne again. She knew the other woman was as worried as she was about those who had marched south. “Bran is keeping an eye on things.”

“He has warned us that the ravens will not fly this far north soon. Receiving word from our people in the south will become more difficult. I expect my father and his army will have joined Lord Snow and the others by now. I thought going to battle was difficult,” Brienne sighed, “the not knowing is just as terrible.”
“It truly is.” Sansa frowned as they took the stairs down, toward the courtyard. Her brother, for she would never be able to think of him as her cousin, and sister had ridden south and she wondered if she would ever see either of them again. She put it out of her mind, or attempted to. They had done all they could for those they cared for and the armies that had marched south. Now they would wait, and they would prepare, and make sure that when their people returned, they had a strong North to come home to.

They met Tormund and his hunting party in the courtyard. He greeted them with a smile. “Lady Sansa, Ser Brienne…” He was fond of the Little Crow’s sister, but his smile for Brienne was softer and fonder still, even if he had realized pursuing her was for naught.

“Tormund,” Sansa’s gaze swept over his party. “Any luck?”

“Some,” he frowned. “The game is getting harder to find. We will have to go farther into the wood with the next hunt. The wights scared most of it away, what survived. I’ll send my men northwest on the morrow, toward the wall. They’ll have better luck in the lands untouched by the dead army. What we caught, we left with the cooks and the butcher.”

“I will send a small group of Stark men with them too,” Sansa decided. “My people know those woods well, and while I do not expect the weather to worsen for another week, if it turns, they can help guide your people back to Winterfell.”

“The free folk know what to do when it snows,” Tormund grinned at her, “but a few extra hands would be a help on the hunt.” He tilted his head at her. “Has there been any news from the Little Crow?”

“Not as yet,” Sansa sighed. She knew the other man was fond of her brother. He had helped them greatly when it was time to reclaim their home. Many free men had died in the Battle of the Bastards. Sansa would always be grateful to them. “I hope we will hear something soon. I know you wish to take your people north before the weather worsens, but we remain ever thankful for your continued aid.”

“Pretty words.” Tormund shook his head while his grin widened. “There is time. The worst snows are weeks away. I told Jon I would keep an eye on you and the Raven until things were decided among the kneelers. The free folk can handle the cold. It’s you southroners that I’m worried about.”

The corners of Sansa’s mouth lifted. “Many of us have lived here in the lower north for most of our lives,” she conceded the geography of it, as she knew that was not an argument any of them would ever win with a man or woman from beyond the wall. “I do not remember the last winter, not truly. I
was too young, but I know it was a harsh one. The problem is that we had a long summer.” She glanced at Brienne beside her. “Father always said that an even harder winter will follow a long summer, and of course, winter is always coming.”

“Of course.” Brienne shook her head. “Do not ask me of winter or snows. I recall the days growing cool, and the nights seeming longer, but I am from an island at the edge of the Narrow Sea. The storms were greater, and the waves harder, but of snow there was none. I am more a foreigner in these lands now than I ever was.”

“I can almost forget some days that you are not a northern woman,” Sansa told her, “you surely have the heart of one. We shall have to teach you the ways of winter and how to survive when the snows fall and the white winds blow.” The words of her father made her think of her pack and she ached with loneliness for them. She felt she had only just gotten Arya back, and she and Jon had been apart more than they had been together since being reunited at Castle Black.

“I would be ever grateful, my lady.” Brienne tipped her head. “Perhaps my new squire will help. She is a northern lady, and bound to know more than a boy from the Westerlands.”

“Surely she will be better at starting a fire when the ground is damp and the snow is falling.” The two women shared a small, knowing smile of remembrance for the time they had spent traveling together, with Podrick as their only aid. “Thank you, Tormund,” Sansa stated, dismissing him. “I will let you know as soon as we have had news of Jon and the fighting in the south.” He left them and they continued their walk across the courtyard. “I will invite Lady Jorelle to dine with us this evening, and we will put the decision to her.”

“If she is as wise as her sister,” Brienne said, “I am sure she will agree. When we’ve had news from Lord Bran, I will talk with Podrick.” She knew he would not want any sort of ceremony, but perhaps if the news from the south was good they would have a feast to celebrate. She would knight him then. A frown drew her brows together as she thought of the fighting to come. Worry was a near constant companion that held her heart in a tight fist and made her stomach clench and twist with dread. Bran had assured her that Jaime was where he needed to be, and though they could not know the outcome, they had put everything in motion that they thought might provide some assistance to a suitable and beneficial outcome.

“I feel like we’ve been a war so long that I’ve forgotten what it feels like to just live,” Sansa admitted quietly, after reading the concern on the other woman’s face. “I was awful to Jon when we were children, and now I cannot imagine my life without him in it. Even knowing the truth of everything, he is my brother. Arya was right. He will always be our brother. Nothing can change that.” She thought of Theon, and for a moment the grief was a living thing, threatening to freeze her, but she pushed it back down. “So many things tried to tear us apart, and we let it happen. Only we can keep us together now. The pack survives.”
“I fear, my lady,” Brienne sighed, “that you are more surrounded by oddities now than wolves. Ravens, dragons, and…” whatever she was now that certain truths had been revealed. She was neither blind nor was she stupid, the questions had been there, whispering long forgotten rumors she heard as a child. Bran was able to provide that information. Then she had dispatched a raven south, to her father, to put him back into play in a game that was much larger than all of them. It was the only way, she thought, that she would be able to protect them all. “There will be an end to the war, there must be. What the world will look like when that happens, no one can say.”

“Perhaps not,” Sansa agreed. “What I know, what I have learned though the lesson was painful is that the pack is true and loyal, be it made of wolves, ravens, half-dragons, moons and suns, or even questionable old lions. We protect our own, and they protect us, and we survive whatever comes in that way. I am a slow learner, but I learn.”

“You are not.” Brienne scowled at her. “We have had this discussion, my lady. I will not hear those words from you. You are far wiser than you give yourself credit for.” She had learned during her time with Sansa that guarding her lady oft meant protecting her from herself as well. Her lady was young, and that led her to impetuous actions at times, but Sansa had one goal in mind and her actions were always meant for the greater good and survival of her family and people. There was honor in that. Family, duty, honor, those were the Tully words, Lady Catelyn’s words, and Sansa embraced them with the strength of her northern heart. She was both the best and the worst of her mother and father. She stumbled and misstepped as all of them did, but she was finding her way.

Sansa frowned at her. “I can only pray that you are right. Sometimes I do not know. I worry that the lessons of Littlefinger and Cersei left a far deeper mark than even Ramsay’s scars.” These were truths she would only speak to Brienne, and only in a quiet voice that could not carry to the ears of others. “I try to think of Lady Olenna and Queen Margaery too, as well as my mother, and do as I think they would, but they are not here. I think of my father, but he was not made for this world, not truly. He was of another time, when honor was greater than ambition.” They stopped walking and stood in the shadow of the keep’s walls. She felt a chill run down her spine. “Sometimes I wonder what my father would think of this world, it’s much different than the one he knew. The great northern houses are mostly gone; wildlings walk the halls of his home, and the boy he took as his bastard son commands an army of northmen and Esossi warriors. Sometimes I question his choices too. He lied to protect Jon, who was not a bastard but the heir hidden for his safety, but father lost his life because honor compelled him to reveal the Baratheon heirs were Lannister bastards. Joffrey was evil and did not deserve to be king, it is true, but it was not worth my father’s life, or the wars that followed.”

“We would talk ourselves in circles if we spent all our time trying to understand the past decisions of others,” Brienne told her, repeating something she had heard her father say many times when she was a girl. “We could lay the blame at your father’s feet, but there were matters beyond him at play. We could blame Littlefinger, for following his ambition for the throne and putting House Lannister and House Stark at war. We could say that the fault lies with Ser Jaime and his sister alone for daring to break the laws of men and gods for… reasons I choose not to understand. We could blame those who put King Robert on the throne, or kept him there when it became apparent that he was not the
ruler that was needed. There were many decisions made. We cannot change them now. The past is finite, and your brother could explain that better than I with his amazing Greensight, but once the stone is cast into the water, the ripples cannot be held back.”

“I hope we are casting the right stones now,” Sansa let her gaze sweep the courtyard. “I hope we have chosen wisely. We have put things in motion we cannot stop, but I will do what I must to protect my family, to protect the north. Even if that means trusting a Lannister.” She shook her head. “Although in truth, it’s you I trust. If you believe in him, so too must I.” Sansa began moving toward the entrance to the keep again. “When we see him again, I will apologize for my cruelty that day. I spoke out of turn and it was unkind.”

“Words are wind, my lady.” Brienne shook her head. “Ser Jaime is aware of that. I’ve heard his tongue cut far deeper than yours. He is not blind to his own faults, and will feel he deserved it for what his family did to yours. He isn’t a wise man, but he is a good one.” She hoped he was finally beginning to learn from his mistakes, so that he would not make them again. He was doing the right thing, finally, but she worried for him. He was pained by all the things he had done and could not change, and while he was trying to be better than he was, she did not know what all of the many battles, uncovered secrets, and changes to come would mean for them.

“I will take your word for it,” Sansa decided. “His actions will tell the truth of it. Bran believes he can be trusted, and between the two of you, I will trust that Jon and Arya are well protected.”

As though speaking his name had conjured them, Bran appeared before them, his chair pushed by a young soldier that had been tasked with his safety. “It is done. We must make preparations to leave. We go south.”

“Leave?” Sansa’s brows climbed in surprise. “Bran, we cannot leave. There must always be a Stark in Winterfell, you know that, and there is too much to do.”

“Sansa, you need not be afraid anymore,” he spoke calmly, his voice as even as it ever was. “We are needed. There are decisions to be made now that the fighting is over. We will make ready and take a small host of soldiers with us. We should travel the Kingsroad, it will take time, but it will be safer than the seas in winter. We will arrive on the third day of the third month, at sunset.”

Brienne’s eyes widened. She felt her heart flutter. “I thought that was a dream.” She had found herself in Riverrun, and woke with an ache of longing for missing Jaime so keenly. Of all the times they had parted, this was by far the worst.

Bran met her gaze with his unwavering dark eyes. “You are the blood of Old Valyria, Ser Brienne,
“Bran,” Sansa stared hard at him, “what’s happened? What of Jon and Arya?” She glanced at Brienne beside her, “and Ser Jaime, Lord Selwyn and the others. What has happened?”

“Many things,” Bran stated. “I can tell you only that they live. I will leave you to make the arrangements. Winterfell will be safe. We will leave the Karstark boy behind. We share common enough ancestors that it will suffice.” Those common ancestors were distant enough for them not to consider the Karstarks their relations, but they too were descended from the Kings of Winter, and so Winterfell would be secure. “I am going to go now, I must speak with Sam and Maester Wolkan.”

Sansa watched him be wheeled away with a scowl. “There are times when I do not know if his way now is truly the Three-Eyed Raven or Brandon, my brother who used to pull my hair and hide my things. We have much to do to prepare for winter and now Bran wants me to ride south without telling me what I am riding toward.”

“They live,” Brienne said quietly. “We ride toward that, and do what we must.” She did not know what that meant, but she would hold on to it for as long as she could.

“What we must,” Sansa nodded. “Well, Ser Brienne, our plans for this day have changed but we still have much work to do.”

“Then let us begin,” Brienne told her.

Sansa nodded, and changed their direction. Together they would decide whom to take with them and make the arrangements needed to keep her people safe in her absence. Many things, Bran had told them. Whatever happened next, the pack would survive, she would see to it.

-TBC-
Jaime had known the moment that he lay eyes on Arya Stark again that his sister still lived. The little she-wolf had met his gaze across the Keep’s outer bailey, once his soldiers gained entry, and nodded once.

“Qyburn and the Mountain are dead,” she told him as they walked across the courtyard to the Tower of the Hand. “So is most of the Queensguard. A couple of them were captured with injuries. I think Ser Boros was one of them,” Arya shrugged. “His face looked familiar, but I’m not really certain.”

“What did you do with Cersei?” Jaime stopped walking to look at her. His shoulder, where Euron Greyjoy’s blade had managed to slide between pauldron and breastplate, throbbed with every movement. The wound wasn’t deep, though, and neither was the one at his cheek, where the man’s ring had cut into his flesh when he struck him.

“The Dragon Queen’s men took her back to camp, like we agreed on.” Arya frowned at him. “Cersei deserves to die for the things she’s done,” there was a hard edge in her tone, “but whatever that is in her belly, lion or kraken, or some other bastard, it isn’t part of this fight. I don’t kill innocents.”

“Lion,” he said quietly, and looked away from her piercing gray eyes. Jaime’s jaw clenched. Then she hadn’t lied about the pregnancy. Part of him had started to wonder. Or maybe he just hoped that Cersei wouldn’t have that to draw him back to her side again. He didn’t exactly know. “It’s definitely a lion. Thank you, Arya,” he glanced at her, just briefly, and strode away toward the Tower again. His sister had always been especially careful to make sure no other man’s seed quickened in her belly. She had blamed Robert’s weakness for the death of her first boy, and when Joffrey was born strong, healthy, and squalling his displeasure to the world, she had vowed that her children would be nothing but perfect, pure, golden lions from that moment on. And he, fool though he was, had thought her vow was proof of how much she loved him, and only him.

Jaime passed several of their soldiers as he made his way up the many stairs of the Tower of the Hand. He nodded absently to each one, and when he finally reached the Hand’s apartments he went in alone. Qyburn had not used these rooms, he knew, for the odd little man had preferred to be close to his lab and his queen. The rooms had not changed overmuch since his father and Uncle Kevan had held the title. Jaime walked through the dimly lit apartment until he stood before the desk. His hand shook a bit as he reached out to touch the deep mahogany. He could still recall the last time he had been there, and the disappointment he felt that nothing he ever did would ever please his father. “Are you cursing me?” The question was spoken quietly, voice barely above a whisper. “When you told me to be the man I was meant to be, is this what you meant? Or did you imagine that I would be more like you?” His fingers slid over the smooth surface of the desk. Jaime stared at the sigil stamp on the desk, lying on its side. It was his father’s sigil, the proud dancing lion. Emotion choked him, made his throat ache and his jaw clench. “But I was never yours, was I?” He whispered thickly. “I was always Joanna’s, and that was why you loathed me as much as you favored me.”

He drew his hand away from the desk and fisted it at his side. “You could have just let her be. There was no reason to betroth her to Loras Tyrell. If you wanted her out of the city, you could have just sent her to the Rock. She could have been happy there, especially if you had brought Myrcella home from Dorne. None of it would have ever gone this far. You destroyed us,” he hissed, “as much as we
destroyed ourselves.”

“You are either the most powerful man in the room, or you are nothing.” Tyrion’s voice sounded from the door. “It was not enough to have a kingdom, father needed to have all seven of them.” He walked into the room, hesitating only a moment as he crossed the threshold. Part of him expected to be engulfed in flames, or struck by lightning, perhaps even to have the very specter of his father return and strangle him for stepping foot in these rooms again. When that didn’t happen, Tyrion’s shoulders slumped a bit, as much in grief and shame as in relief.

“Do you think,” Jaime rounded the desk to stand behind the dark leather padded chair, “if father could see what became of his house and the legacy he was so determined to build, that he would have thought it was all worth it? Father dead, Joffrey dead, Myrcella, Tommen, Uncle Kevan, Willem, Martyn, Lancel, all gone. Cersei imprisoned, alive for now, but who knows how long that will last. The two of us, his most bitter disappointments, all that remains of his precious legacy.”

“The two of us,” Tyrion nodded, “serving wolves and dragons. He would be completely beside himself, I think. We would never hear the end of it.” He pulled his body onto one of the chairs in front of the desk with a sigh. “No, it wasn’t worth it. We could debate the right or wrong of everyone’s choices until the mountains crumble into the sea, and we would never find the correct answer. All we have is what is.” He regarded his brother closely. “Are you going to see her?”

“Would the Queen even permit it?” Jaime gripped the back of the chair for a moment before he pushed away. He walked to one of the wide windows and stared out at the city beyond the Keep’s walls. “What would I even say to Cersei now? I aided her enemies and took her throne.”

“It was never hers,” Tyrion reminded him gently. A sad smile greeted his brother when Jaime looked back at him. “Her need for power, to crush her enemies, to prove her worth and cleverness are what has put our sweet sister in her chains. It was not enough to be Robert’s queen, or to be Queen Regent, or even Dowager Queen. Cersei wanted to rule.”

“And she did,” Jaime shrugged at him, despite the pain in his shoulder, “all it cost her was everything.” He walked back toward the desk. “Of course I am going to see her. She is still our sister, and the child that she is carrying is mine. The least I can do is look her in the eye before we strip her of everything.”

Tyrion nodded. He thought that would be the answer. “You should go back to camp,” he frowned at his brother’s obvious injuries. “See the maester, be treated. Someone messed up your pretty face again. Soon I’ll be the most handsome Lannister.”

“That, I promise you, will never happen.” Jaime smirked at him, and then he shook his head. “I will… but later. There’s still much to do. There is still fighting in the city, and I want to make sure the Red Keep is searched, thoroughly, before we turn it over to the Queen and Lord Snow. I don’t trust what contingency plans Qyburn may have come up with, and there is still any number of passageways throughout the keep. We have Varys’s maps, but I doubt all of them are known. We should search everything, every room, no matter how insignificant it may seem.”

“How utterly responsible and diligent of you,” Tyrion pointed out. “You do know that you’re no longer Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, don’t you?”

“Piss off,” he tossed back. Jaime strode toward the door. “I may not be Lord Commander any more, but I am the only one we have that knows how to do the job. Patience, brother, the Queen can wait a day or two to move in and start changing the tapestries.” He stopped at the door and looked back. “She’s waited this long,” he said, before leaving his brother alone in the Hand’s chambers.
In truth, Jaime wasn’t certain if it was his father’s old quarters or his brother that he was in such a hurry to get away from, but he could not breathe easily again until he had left the Tower completely. It was the first time that he had been alone with Tyrion since riding south; Jaime just wasn’t prepared to answer any of his little brother’s very direct and very personal questions. Nor did he want to listen to any of Tyrion’s theories or ideas about his life and the direction it had taken, or where it should go henceforth.

Jaime didn’t have any answers for Tyrion. He didn’t have any answers for anyone. He was trying to do what he thought he was right; at least as far as taking King’s Landing and the Iron Throne were concerned. As to anything else, Jaime couldn’t say. He didn’t know. He never knew, honestly. That was almost surely the problem. As much as he might accuse Cersei of not having any foresight, did he? He rarely thought through his actions before he did them.

He didn’t think of the outcome when he lay with Cersei for the first time, beyond what he wanted and the promises he made her that night. He didn’t think of the consequences of swearing his vows to Aerys as a member of the Kingsguard, or continuing his relationship with Cersei after she married Robert and became Queen. It never occurred to him that it might actually be a problem to father her children, bastards who would have no true claim to the throne. One moment and then another, and another, and yet another where he had acted, oft times impetuously, and thought only of the consequences when they came to bear. He could count on the fingers of his remaining hand the number of times he had actually thought about what he was about to do before he did it. He knew shoving his sword into Aerys’s back would save the city. He had known that lying about the sapphires would save Brienne, though he didn’t think anyone could have foreseen the loss of his hand. Jaime had known that riding north to fight for the living might mean he would lose everything, even his life, but that it was the right thing to do, the only thing he could do.

And he had known that when he rode away from Winterfell that he was leaving his heart and the better part of his soul behind.

What could he say to Tyrion about what was to come from his life when he could not say it to Brienne?

He did not want Tyrion’s japes or witticisms. He was a man pining and it was pathetic, and he did not need to hear that from others. There were too many questions before them, too many things unknown. He was Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, or would be once Queen Daenerys confirmed his title, and Brienne was of the Stormlands. They were hundreds of leagues apart, and then there were her oaths to the Stark girls to consider.

Jaime was thinking through the consequences this time, considering what would come next. He rather wished he hadn’t. He wondered if he would be pining quite so much. Probably.

He looked to the sky when he reached the courtyard outside the Tower of the Hand. His eyes turned immediately to the east, but in the afternoon sky there was nothing to be seen. With a sigh Jaime strode across the yard to another set of stone stairs. They would take him to the hall and beyond that the throne room.

His legs felt as heavy as logs, and his feet as thick as iron as he walked toward that dark, hideous room. Jaime would never understand why everyone who sat the Iron Throne insisted on keeping the throne room so dark, as though all the deeds there must be horribly sinister. He supposed in a way they were. As he pushed through the wide, double doors and stared down the length of the chamber, that twisted, melted, dark structure of iron on its raised dais made his stomach clench and roll, just as it always had. It was not a prize to be had, though others surely thought it was. It was quite ugly, really, and he knew it to be uncomfortable to sit upon, painful even for the sharpness of some of the
blades remained.

Jaime clenched his jaw tightly shut and squared his shoulders as he walked slowly toward it. When he had reached the stairs to the dais he stopped, and there he stood, staring. This was where Aerys had burned Rickard Stark while Brandon strangled himself in his Tyroshi noose. It was where he met with his pyromancers and planned the destruction of an entire city. All the deeds, he thought, all the deeds he’d ever known to happen in this room were horrible.

He felt, more than heard the movement beside him. Jaime glimpsed the shine of blue and silver armor from the corner of his eye. He nodded toward the hulking, twisted piece of metal before them. “I killed him there,” he nodded to the spot, which would forever be burned into his memory. “His blood ran across the dais and down the steps, it took hours to scrub them clean I was told.” Jaime moved a few steps up the stairs and turned. He pointed with his golden hand, “That was where Rickard Stark was hanging as he burned.” His eyes swept the great expanse of the throne room.

“You’re standing where Barristan Selmy stood, when Joffrey stripped him of his cloak. Where Sansa Stark stood every time His Grace, King Joffrey, the first of his name, had her beaten in retaliation for the battles her brother, Robb Stark, the King in the North, won against the crown’s armies.” He snorted. “My father’s armies.” Jamie looked down at the man before him. “I was standing right there,” he pointed to the space at the man’s feet, “when King Tommen took my cloak, for daring to try and protect him and his bride from the fanatical dealings of the High Sparrow, and I was standing right over there,” he pointed, this time with his left hand, to the place at the far right of the room, near the back, in the gallery, “when I witnessed the crown placed upon my dear, sweet sister’s head. I had just ridden through the city. I saw the great smoking crater where the Sept once stood, I saw the fires, and heard the cries of the people. There were injured and dead, and fear, so much fear. Had I not given up every boyhood dream I ever had to prevent that kind of disaster? I sent my men to help where they could and I came here, and all I could think, even as Cersei was proclaimed Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, was where was Tommen? What had become of that sweet golden child, the boy whose greatest ambition as King was to outlaw beets and name his kitten, Ser Pounce, as Lord Commander of the Catsguard? A boy who had become a young man, one who only wanted to protect his mother and his pretty wife and love them both.” Jaime turned his tormented eyes back to the throne. “They should melt the thrice-damned thing down and level this room. There is nothing but madness to be found here.”

“Perhaps we should not stop there, let us level the entire Keep, for surely there are curses within the walls.” Selwyn walked slowly up the stairs until he stood on the dais, beside the throne. His fingers touched it lightly, carefully, as he circled it. Decades had passed since the last time he was in this room, in this Keep, or any place near the city. “When we were children, Rhaella and I wondered at the madness of the generations that came before us. Could it be that Maegor the Cruel, when he built this terrible red castle had allowed some dark sorcerer, some terrible woods witch to cast his very nature into the walls so that it might haunt all who came after him?” Selwyn shook his head. “My father was not a cruel man, and yet, the madness came for him too. Aegon wanted to help the smallfolk, but the nobles were resistant, as they always are.” He stood beside the throne and looked down at the man before him, this knight who had traded his honor in the murdering of Selwyn’s brother. “We all hear the stories as children, the tales of Balerion, Quicksilver, Vhagar and Meraxes. We grew up here, in this keep, what time we weren’t at Dragonstone, with the skulls on display to remind of just how great and looming those beasts had been. When Aegon and his brothers, Aemon and Aerion were born, each of them was given a dragon egg. They passed to my father when Aerion died and Aemon abdicated to the Night’s Watch. My father became obsessed with them, with the very idea of what the dragons could do for him and his rule if they lived again. So…” Selwyn shrugged. “He set out to make that happen.”

“Summerhall,” Jaime said quietly, voice thick and rasping, but still sounding quite loud in the cavernous chamber.
“Summerhall,” Selwyn confirmed with a nod. “We all know what happened there. Our elder brother, Duncan, named for Ser Duncan the Tall, died with our father and Aerys was made king in his place. The madness came for him too. I have spent my life worrying that I would be next, that the madness would find me, even as I stayed on my island. I have prayed there was enough of House Dayne, from my father’s mother, and House Tarth of my own mother to temper the Targaryen curse.” He moved slowly down the stairs again until he stood beside the other man. “I think there must be, for I agree with you. Melt the damned thing and let me return to my island. There is nothing here but darkness.”

“And yet,” Jaime stated, “we are about to raise another Targaryen upon that mad pedestal. It can only be folly; we have seen what happens to those who sit that throne.”

“She is willing to bend,” Selwyn told him. “It is a good sign. I am optimistic that she could yet break the curse, but the problem will not be with Daenerys Stormborn. It will be with those whom she surrounds herself. She will need a stronger Hand, I do not believe your brother is up to the task. The Hand of the King, or Queen,” he continued, and ignored the flash of annoyance and insult in the younger man’s gaze, “must be able to bring out the best and curb the worst of their chosen ruler. Your brother loves her too much. You have seen it too. He wants her approval, needs it, and it stays his hand when he should hammer his point. Tyrion is a very smart man,” Selwyn conceded, “and there should be a place on her Council for him, but I do not think he can serve Daenerys or the realm as Hand, not as they need.”

A line drew his brows into a deeper frown. Jaime nodded, once, and with some hesitation. It would pain him to suggest that title be taken from his brother, he knew that Tyrion had tried to serve her well, but the other man was right. His brother wanted too badly to be praised for his cleverness than to use it as it was needed. “She seems to respond to forthrightness,” Jaime pointed out, “even though she does not appear to like it much.”

“Children rarely like being told what to do by their betters,” Selwyn smirked at him. “The coming days will not be easy, but they will be necessary. Daenerys has a great deal of potential, but it is what we do that will shape her success or failure.” He turned to look at the Iron Throne again. “House Dayne,” he commented, abruptly changing the topic, “it is from House Dayne that Father, Rhaella, and Brienne inherited their eyes. From my grandmother, Dyanna.” Selwyn sighed. “Let us hope the madness died with Aerys. Let us hope that Daenerys is more than the sum of her Targaryen ancestors.”

“She will have to be more Rhaegar than Aerys,” Jaime concluded. “I do not think the madness would have taken him. He seemed too strong for that.”

“She will have to be stronger than Rhaegar, and follow the dictates of her duty rather than her heart,” Selwyn replied. “That was his weakness. He felt too much and it led him to his doom. In truth, that weakness may have started all of this.”

“Perhaps we should do away with the position of Hand,” Jaime said, the idea occurring so suddenly that he voiced it before considering the implications. He appeared as surprised as Selwyn, but once stated, he went on to explain his thoughts. “Jon Arryn bankrupted the realm to fulfill Robert’s whims, and let his King drink, and whore, and make a mockery of himself and House Baratheon. Lord Arryn was so busy ruling in Robert’s stead that he never noticed what was happening between Cersei and I until the end, and we’ll never know if he did actually see it for himself or if Littlefinger whispered it in his ear.” Jaime frowned as he paced a few steps away. “Tyrion is too close to Daenerys to act effectively, and my father didn’t care at all for Joffrey or Tommen, it was the power he was granted that he longed for. The Hand rules with the King’s voice. That should not be. If we want to change what has come before, break the wheel, as Daenerys has stated, then start there. The
Queen must rule in her own voice, and she must be held accountable for those decisions. Let the Small Council hold her accountable, and if the madness of House Targaryen comes for Daenerys Stormborn, then the Small Council shall be granted the ability to vote in the majority to remove her from the throne. She will not like it, but if posed to her correctly, I think she will accept it.”

Selwyn considered his suggestion. His head inclined while he thought about it. “Expand the small council, then. In addition to the seats that have always been held by the Masters of War, Ships, Coin, and Whispers, along with the Lord Commander of the guard, and the Grand Maester, add seats for the Wardens of each region. No longer will they be liable only to the people of the North, West, East, or South. They must be liable to the realm. They must rule together.”

“No longer do we liken the King or Queen of the Kingdoms as Protector of the Realm,” Jaime told him. “We make the Protector of the Realm the highest seat on the Council, with the power to call the Council together and issue missives on the Queen’s behest, but not to rule in the Queen’s name, as the Hand once did. If such a time arises that the King or Queen is not of age to rule,” he said, thinking of Tommen and Joffrey, “then it is the Council that shall rule until the King, or Queen, comes of age. No longer do we allow a Regent to be appointed who may decide to usurp the throne for themselves or attempt to reshape the council to their advantage.” He frowned in concentration. “A shield to guard the realms of men; that is what the Council shall become, and who better to sit as the first Lord Protector of the Seven Kingdoms than Jon Snow, who has already sworn to protect the realms of men.”

“He will surely not like that,” Selwyn pointed out, but nodded in agreement. He liked the idea. “For that matter, let us do away with the Master of Whispers. Paranoia only begets more paranoia, men and women should be able to rule their houses and lands without living with the fear that their utterances will make it back to the Queen. If the Council is doing its job, and the Wardens and Lord Paramounts of the land are ruling as they are meant to, then there should be nothing for a Master of Whispers to whisper about.”

Jaime laughed suddenly, and the sound rang hollowly in the empty throne room. “Are we to stand here, the two of us, and completely reform the entire Seven Kingdoms?”

“How do you think the Seven Kingdoms were formed to begin with?” Selwyn shrugged. “Someone must do it. We will take the ideas back to the Queen and the other advisors that have been serving her these past few days. We shall see what she has to say of it.”

“Why not,” Jaime decided, “the worst she can do is let her dragon burn us.”

“Not if he eats us instead,” Selwyn decided. “I imagine that would be a far worse way to go.”

Jaime closed his eyes with a sigh. “Yes, thank you for the nightmares that is going to produce. As if I had not already spent too many nights dreaming of that great, bloody beast.” He could still see the glow of the creature’s eyes in his mind, the way his teeth gleamed, and how the fire had looked as it hurried toward him. He had endured some very unpleasant nights after the Goldroad. He imagined he would have a few more now, thanks to Lord Selwyn.

Selwyn considered the other man for several long moments, until the knight before him began to shift with apprehension at his stare. “You never claimed the throne for yourself. You could have done, when you slew Aerys, but you didn’t. Why?”

“I didn’t want it,” Jaime said, as though it should be that simple. “As a boy I dreamed of being Duncan the Tall, Barristan the Bold, or Ser Arthur Dayne. I never dreamed of being Aegon or Jaehaerys. I think every boy and girl dreams, at some point, of having a love as great as Jaehaerys and Alysanne,” and perhaps that was why Cersei had managed to convince him so easily that their
carnal actions were right, “but I never saw myself as the King, only as one of his swords.”

“A fair point.” Selwyn turned and began striding away from the throne. “Now, you can tell me who Ser Bronn of the Blackwater is and why he rode into camp as the city bells were announcing our victory, asking when he was going to get his castle from those golden Lannister cunts.”

Jaime groaned. His shoulders slumped a bit, and his head ached. That was not one of the problems he had anticipated having to deal with in the aftermath of taking the throne from Cersei. Tyrion had promised Bronn Highgarden, but he had a feeling Daenerys would not honor that agreement. He had suspected as much all along, and suspected that Tyrion knew that too. Getting rid of Bronn or paying him off was going to be difficult, and quite possibly dangerous if he was still carrying that golden lion encrusted crossbow. “He might just be the first person that I suggest Her Grace send to Meereen,” he responded, and followed along behind the other man. They left the throne room behind and went to tackle the more immediate problems.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

I was a total mess of feels when Dany gave Tyrion that pin. I still love that scene. I truly loved their dynamic. What I don't like is the position of Hand. That's just me and based on observations through the show & books of how the position has been used by others. I'm sure Tyrion would do a kick ass job of it for Dany, just like he did for Joff. No worries, I have found a place for that Lion.

I cannot thank you all enough for the comments & kudos. This fandom is wonderful!

Many of you have had thoughts, or questions that you have shared. I love that! Please feel free. I love your ideas, and I'm sure there's plenty I have forgotten or not thought about but should've. If anyone is so inclined, you can find me on tumblr with the same name as here.
In the end, Jaime returned to camp only when he could not delay it any further. He had a couple of squires fetch clean things from his rooms in the Keep, so that he might have something else to wear in the coming days than the worn things he had originally taken north with him, and the borrowed leathers he had acquired at Winterfell. The squires were both boys of barely ten years. One of them, Stevan Raefrey had squired for him before, during his time at Riverrun and after, before he had left his sister to ride north. The other boy was new, Garrett Hill, a bastard from the Westerlands, rumored to be the get of Lord Lefford of Golden Tooth.

Jaime made a mental note as he returned to camp to keep an eye on Lord Lefford. He wondered if the man had sent his bastard to foster and squire at court because he intended to elevate him to heir, above his daughter the Lady Alysanne Lefford, who had long been the Lady of Golden Tooth. He did not trust Lord Lefford, who had marital ties to House Frey through some branch of his family or another, and had always had a rather strong army but had folded much too easily to the advancement of Robb Stark, giving the Young Wolf a foothold in the Westerlands during the War of the Five Kings.

He felt a bit chagrined to realize he was already thinking like the Warden of the West.

Upon returning to camp, and while his squires made ready his tent, Jaime made his way to the Queen’s side, to report on the progress of the day. He entered the tent with little fanfare and immediately bowed to the Queen and his Prince. “Your Grace.”

“Ser Jaime,” she was seated at the table with Lord Snow, Ser Davos, and his brother. She gave a flick of her wrist to allow him to rise. A single map of the city, which was now marked to show where the heaviest of the fighting and most damage had occurred, had replaced the maps and battle plans that previously littered the table. There was also a plate of cheese and fruit, and cups of wine for those present. “You have done well this day,” she told him. “You have kept your word.”

Daenerys was still wary of him, but he had proved himself, so far. “I am grateful that my Warden of the West has returned to me relatively unharmed, though word of your injuries defending Lord Snow had reached my ears. Have you been to see a maester?”

“Not as yet, your grace.” Jaime felt the pull of his injuries. It had been a long day. He was ready to be rid of his armor and wash himself clean of the dust and blood that battle had wrought. “I came to report that much of the fighting is done. The city is well and truly yours. My men and the Gold Cloaks are patrolling the streets, securing the smallfolk and keeping them safe. The injured are being treated, and we have made certain that any of the Lannister soldiers that would not bend the knee are being held as prisoner in the barracks on the east side of the city, along with any of the Golden Company that also survived the day.”

“And are your men still searching the Red Keep?” Her head tilted curiously. “Have they found...
“Not yet,” he explained, “but I would rather be safe, given the curious nature of my sister’s choice of Hand. Qyburn was an odd little fellow. While Cersei would not have believed that her army would falter, Qyburn would have planned for any contingency.”

“Very well,” she nodded. “I will bow to your expertise in this matter, as your brother, my Hand, has agreed with your course of action. We will hold a council meeting in the morning, to discuss what should happen next. As Warden of the West, I would expect your presence.”

“Oh, of course, Your Grace.” Jaime tipped his head again. He glanced at Tyrion, who seemed rather smug. He would like to wipe that expression from his brother’s face. What did Tyrion have to be smug about? That the girl was learning to listen to the arguments of her betters? That she seemed calm in this moment? She had bloody well burned Varys alive. She could capitulate to madness at any moment. The battle for her soul was not yet won. “I would ask a favor of Your Grace,” he continued, “if you would permit it, I would like to see my sister.”

She exchanged a look with Jon, who nodded. They had suspected that he would ask. Daenerys had gone back and forth on the idea of allowing it, and found herself once again considering the consequences. Cersei was well guarded, and the tent within which she was kept was at the center of camp. It would be difficult to try and rescue her or steal her away. Daenerys sighed. “I will allow it, but your sister’s fate has already been decided, though she knows not what it is.” She studied the man before her, standing tall and proud in his armor, with the air of fatigue and shame, and grief about him, but arrogance too, in that he would not want her to see how affected he was at his sister’s plight. “She will be removed from this place on the morrow. A ship is leaving at first light to return to Dragonstone, Cersei will be aboard it. I will keep her there until the child is born.” Her brow rose at the surprise he was unable to mask. “I do not hold children accountable for the sins of their parents, Lord Lannister.”

His jaw clenched. His mouth felt uncomfortably dry. At his side, the fingers of his left hand tingled. He longed to fold them into a fist but held them loose. “What of the child?” He asked instead. “What is to become of it?”

“It will be raised as a ward of the crown,” Jon replied. “Robert sent Theon to Winterfell to keep Balon Greyjoy from launching another rebellion, but Theon always knew he was a hostage. He could not rid himself of that bitterness, or the conflict of being pulled between kraken and wolf. We did not tell him until it was too late that he was both. We will try to prevent that happening again.”

“A ward is better than a hostage,” Tyrion explained. “The child will want for nothing, and we will know that it is kept safe. There would be those who might attempt to use the child to usurp the throne. None in this tent,” he added quickly, “but others in the realm who might seek to usurp power for themselves in this way.”

“I will not allow a child to be exploited for the sake of a throne,” Daenerys vowed. “That is not my way, nor am I in the habit of imprisoning innocents. The child shall be our ward, and when it comes of age, if there are no other heirs to Casterly Rock, I will allow the titles and lands to be passed on, if you so choose it.”

“I see.” That Tyrion would not properly look him in the eye told the tale. Jaime felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise with his ire. “Your Grace, may I have a word with my brother?”

Daenerys looked between the two men, that her Hand grimaced before nodding his agreement did concern her, but there were guards enough throughout the camp that she did not think he would be in any danger with his brother. Of the Kingslayer, his face had become as stone, but his eyes were
burning with barely restrained fury. It was a concern. Would he yet betray her for the sake of his sister and the child? She thought they had come to a suitable arrangement that would protect the babe. “Of course. You should know, my Lord, that your brother argued quite passionately on your sister’s behalf, where the child was concerned.”

“Yes,” he stated, eyes moving to Tyrion again. “Of that I have no doubt.” He nodded his head to the Queen and his Prince again before turning and leaving the tent. His brother’s sigh, and the sound of his chair creaking, followed him into the early evening. Jaime walked quickly away from that tent until he was far enough away that their conversation would not be heard. He had to wait for Tyrion to catch up to him, and another time he would have slowed his gait in deference to his brother’s smaller stature, but not in this moment. Not when he was brimming with anger.

Tyrion had known that Jaime would not be pleased. The part of him that always wanted the approval of his big brother had dreaded that confrontation, but he was not just Ser Jaime Lannister’s little brother any more. He was the Hand of the Queen and he had an entire realm to think about. “Jaime,” he began carefully, hoping to assuage some of his brother’s anger before it got out of control.

“So I am to be denied another of my children,” he grit out, cutting his brother off before he could even start. Jaime’s jaw clenched. “I am to stand aside, again, and watch a child of mine grow without any idea as to how they came to be? Or worse, is the child to know and I am to ignore that knowledge for the sake of your bloody Dragon Queen? Tell me, brother, for I long to hear what reasoning was behind this oh so benevolent idea.”

He sighed quietly. This was not going as well as he had hoped. “The reputation of House Lannister —”

“Is already beyond repair,” Jaime shot back. “That is not a reason. Why, Tyrion? I expected this of the others, but I did not expect it of you. I thought of all people that you were the one I could trust when it came to the care and safety of my child.”

“A child that will live and long for nothing in this world,” Tyrion shot back, his own irritation rising beneath his brother’s accusations. “What did you expect to have happen?” His eyes narrowed. “Is this why you will not commit to a marriage contract with your Lady Knight? Did you think that if you won Daenerys’s favor in battle she would let you take Cersei back to the Rock? Or allow you into exile with her, so that the two of you might raise this child together? Surely, brother, you are not that foolish.”

“Of course not,” Jaime spat, although he would not deny the idea had crossed his mind, a fleeting thought he had quickly pushed away. It was with Brienne that his heart lay, but nostalgia had captured his imagination for a few moments. “Cersei’s fate was sealed, as I have stated before. I cannot save her. That is my failure to live with, for surely had I tried years ago, there might have been a different outcome for all of us. It is the child that I think of now, my child, Tyrion. I care not if it is a Waters or a Hill, it can remain a bastard if the Queen so chooses, if that makes her feel more comfortable with allowing it to be raised in the Westerlands, but the child does not belong in King’s Landing. It should be raised at the Rock. This child should have all the advantages that Joffrey, and Myrcella, and Tommen were denied.”

“You mean it would have you as its father,” Tyrion pointed out. “That is not an idea that I am opposed to, but think Jaime. Think!” He held up his hands, beseeching his brother to cast his mind beyond the moment and his immediate upset. Lack of foresight had always been Jaime’s weakness. He was impetuous and bold, and as well as it had sometimes served him as the Golden Lion, it would not serve him well as Lord of Casterly Rock. It had also been his downfall, on many occasions. “You are Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, Lord of Casterly Rock, and you will have
to marry.” His brother scoffed but Tyrion stood his ground. “You will have to take a wife that is politically advantageous to the Crown and the West and there will have to be heirs. It is the way of our world, you do not like it, none of us likes it, but marriage is how alliances are made. We need to heal this realm, unite it and bring it together. If it will not be your Lady Knight, then it must be some other woman to solidify governance of the Seven Kingdoms. A Lady from Dorne, perhaps, or even the Vail. I would not choose for you, but it will happen. It must, and you know it must.” He stared into his brother’s eyes and saw the battle that was being waged between duty and desire. “Would you ask your Lady wife, whomever she may be, to accept your bastard into her home? Not only a bastard, but one born of the relations between brother and sister, an abomination in the eyes of many.”

His jaw ached from the pressure behind it, the force of how tightly he was clenching it together. Jaime wondered, as he ground his teeth together, that they did not break and turn to dust in his mouth. “Is that how you think of Tommen and Myrcella? Were they abominations?”

“Of course not,” Tyrion said quietly, wounded by the question. He had loved those children. He mourned for them still. “Not even Joffrey, as twisted and cruel as he was. Jaime.” He shook his head; sadness turned his lips down and made his miss-matched eyes glimmer too bright in the torchlight surrounding them. “The child would not be alone. It would be here, with me. It would be safe, I promise you that.”

“What is safety to a life without family? What did that do to Cersei, what did it do to Joffrey?” Jaime looked away from him. “It twisted them, that loneliness, that ambivalence. What kind of life is that?”

“It was not Tyrion’s idea alone.” Jon Snow stepped out of the shadows to join the brothers. He had given them a few moments alone before following. “It is not a punishment, truly.”

“Yours?” Surprise slackened his face. He glanced from Jon to his brother and back again. “Why?”

“I was raised a bastard in my father’s house,” Jon explained, “I know how it feels to grow up believing you are your family’s shame. My father, the man I believed to be my father,” he corrected, “had a Lady wife that could not accept me. This is not a punishment,” he said, reading the other man’s thoughts, “it truly is not.”

“How many people know that Cersei is with child?” Tyrion asked. “There may be rumors from the few who have seen her, and we do not know what knowledge Varys may have spread, but they would be just that… rumors and whispers, nothing more. We are removing Cersei from King’s Landing. She will be well cared for and safe at Dragonstone.”

“Better the child be raised as a ward, knowing neither parent,” Jon explained, “than be raised with the shame that I have known. It is not an easy burden, I promise you that.”

“Is it not my choice to make?” Jaime scrubbed his hand over his face. “Ned Stark lied to keep you safe, and I suppose you think you are doing the same thing here, but consider for a moment how you felt learning the truth. I thought we had all agreed that we could not rebuild this realm on the bedrock of lies. What is to happen in sixteen years, or twenty, or thirty, when the truth is known; these things have a way of being revealed, we know that. We have seen that.”

Jon sighed. His shoulders slumped. He had tried, truly. “Let it be a Hill of the Westerlands then. I will speak with Daenerys. I do not think this is wise, but on your head be it, Ser Jaime.”

“Then so it shall,” he agreed. He would not allow himself to feel hope, for surely there was some wisdom in their arguments, but he would not abandon another child of his. He would not turn away,
not this time. Jaime walked away from them then, for he had said all he could and needed to, and if he was going to see Cersei he would need all his wits about him.

Somehow he was not surprised to enter his tent and find Daven and Addam waiting for him. Jaime sighed as he walked to the corner; the squires he had acquired in the city had been waiting outside the tent. They followed him now, and he stood still to allow them to start removing his armor. “Why is it that I think the two of you,” he said to his cousin and oldest friend, “are about to make this day even worse.”

“Would we do that?” Addam was seated in a chair, legs crossed at his ankles and a cup of wine in his hand. There was a full jug of it on the table, and the squires had brought food as well. He looked at Daven. “We wouldn’t, would we?”

Daven pretended to consider. Beneath his blonde beard his lips pursed. He tilted his head to the side and studied their liege Lord. “We would,” he said finally and turned his gaze back to Addam. “It is what we do, what we have always done. Someone needs must keep him honest, and I feel we have been too lax these past years.”

“Indeed.” Addam sighed. “We should remedy that. When we are old and confined to our beds, with our many children and grandchildren to carry on our legacies, there will be songs sang of how we tamed the great Golden Lion and saved the realm from his stupidity.”

“Fuck off,” Jaime sneered, “the bloody both of you.” He noted that both of them had already changed and cleaned up from the day’s battle. “I am in no mood for your japes, say what it is you have come to say and let it us be done with it.” He grimaced as his right pauldron was loosened and removed. His shoulder was throbbing again.

The two men shared a look but it was Daven that sat forward in his chair. “Willas Tyrell is alive.” He allowed the shock to register on his cousin’s face before he continued. “He was in Oldtown visiting the maesters when you marched on Highgarden.”

“I thought he was in the Sept with the rest of his family?” Jaime felt the cold fist of dread settle inside him. “Was he not there with Lord Mace and Ser Garlan for Loras’s trial?”

“No. It would seem that Lady Olenna was wise enough to keep her eggs out of the same basket,” Daven told him.

“How?” Jaime looked between them. “How do we know this? If Willas has been hidden all this time, why is it being revealed now?” It would mean they still had an heir to Highgarden, a possible Lord of the Reach. The possibilities were both good and bad.

“We’ve had word from the men left garrisoned at Highgarden,” Daven told him, “that Willas Tyrell has left Oldtown and is riding to Dorne. He intends to treat with Quentyn Martell, the new Prince of Dorne, to raise forces on behalf of House Tyrell and take back his family’s ancestral seat in the name of their Queen, Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen.”

“This news is weeks old,” Addam explained, “he would not know that House Lannister has bent the knee to the Dragon Queen and we are now on the same side. Although, I doubt that would matter at this point,” he glanced at Daven beside him. “House Lannister did destroy House Tyrell.”

“There will have to be restitution for that fact,” Daven sighed. “Or else the Westerlands will find itself at war with The Reach, and neither land can afford that at this time, not with the worst of winter still to come. We will have to offer compensation for the wrongs done the Tyrells, but…”
Jaime sighed. “But how do you pay for the crimes of wiping out an entire House, yes, I see the problem.” He swore under his breath. “Whatever guilt I felt at taking Highgarden was erased when Lady Olenna confessed to killing Joffrey, and it was Cersei’s madness that destroyed the others in the Sept. I do not agree with what she did, nor do I condone it.” Two wrongs would not make a right, and his cousin was correct. They could not afford war or continued strife between their houses. Though Jaime doubted their two houses would ever be friendly, he could hear the Wench’s voice in his mind, reminding him that honor compelled him to try and breach the chasm his House had created. “Pull our men out of Highgarden. They are to take nothing but their own equipment. The coffers are to be left as they are. Any of those men who were conscripted from the armies of the Reach who would choose to stay and make reparations to their Lord may do so. Likewise, I want it known to the armies in the Crownlands that any man of the Reach may choose to return to House Tyrell or his home.” Once his armor was gone he waved both squires away and moved to the basin of water they had left for him.

“We cannot afford to pay back the gold that was taken from Highgarden,” Daven reminded him. “Our mines are still producing, and we have those at Castamere, but we would bankrupt ourselves in the attempt.”

“Gold will not settle the debt,” Jaime said quietly. “I will bring the matter up with Lord Snow and the Queen. An invitation will be sent to Dorne, I am sure, to request the Prince come and swear fealty to the crown. The same invitation will be sent to Willas, now that we are aware of him. I can meet with him then. We will settle the matter between us.” He wondered which of his pretty cousins he would have to give in marriage to Willas to unite their Houses and settle the war between their families. It sat sourly in his stomach. Marriage should not be the currency of peace. He would hope that Willas would see another way, that he was more Margaery than Loras, though Jaime recalled the younger man to be even-tempered and more interested in horse breeding than politics. “Is that all? Or are there any other debts crawling out of the woodwork that I should know of?”

“None that would require your head as payment,” Addam drawled. “Do not look so dour, Jaime. You have won the day.” He poured a cup of wine and slid it across the table, within reach of his old friend.

“It does not feel much like winning,” he sighed. Jaime shrugged out of his shirt with a wince and expected his shoulder as well as he could without a looking glass. It did not look as though it would need stitches, but it would surely need treating. He ignored the other two men as he washed the dirt, and sweat, and blood from his upper body.

“Duty rarely does,” Daven reminded him. “Would you have me send word back to the Rock now? Or should we wait.”

“Let’s wait,” Jaime decided. “There is not much that has been decided yet. Let the Queen take her throne and then I will send word back to Aunt Genna with the official decision of what is to become of House Lannister.”

“Then we shall leave you.” Daven stood up and nudged Addam to follow him. “I will have someone sent to look at that shoulder. Rest cousin, and eat, we will talk more on the morrow on how to strengthen the Westerlands.”

“On the morrow,” Jaime decided. He waited for them to leave before he finished cleaning himself. He wondered if it was too late to give it all up, let Tyrion have the Rock and everything that went with it. He could ride north, give his sword to Sansa Stark and live out the rest of his days in the bitter cold. That appealed to Jaime only slightly more than bending the knee to the Dragon Queen did, and it would not pay his debts, he knew. He could not lay all the crimes that were coming to
bear on his father’s head, or solely upon Cersei’s. He had played his part, too, and now he must answer for it.

Jaime could not stomach the idea of wine or food, but he forced both down while he waited for a maester or healer to be brought to his tent. Afterward, with his shoulder treated and bandaged, and dressed in clean linen, woolskin breeches and light brown leather, he went in search of the tent where Cersei was being held. His mood was even darker than it had been after his talk with Tyrion and Jon Snow, but this was not a meeting that he could put off indefinitely. He would face her, he must, or she would surely haunt him the rest of his days. She might anyway, but at least he would know they had these moments before being parted for the final time.

The tent was as guarded as he was told to expect it. It was surrounded by Unsullied, and he supposed they would be the best to ensure the former queen’s continued good health. Jaime decided they could not expect it of the Northern soldiers, or even those from the West, and certainly not from the Dothraki. Jaime nodded to the men at the entrance of the tent as he approached and one of them pulled back the flap for him.

The tent was larger than his, but only by a small degree, and far more sparsely decorated. There was only a cot, a small table, and a single chair. He found Cersei inside, seated on the chair, back straight and staring straight ahead at seemingly nothing. No doubt planning how she would yet win and bring vengeance down upon all those who had opposed and betrayed her. Jaime looked to his left, to the silent Unsullied soldier that was standing just inside the tent. He jerked his head back to the exit. She would be safe enough with him. He had not come to free her, and truly, he did not have a key for the chains at her wrists, which he noted were secured to a long tether attached to the pole at the center of the tent. It was uncomfortably familiar, really. Jaime tried not to think about why that was.

Her eyes lifted slowly, as though she knew that it was him. They burned with fury, it was an expression he had come to know well. “Cersei.”

“So you have survived your time in the north,” she stated simply, “and your betrayal was not about the living after all. Have you come to beg forgiveness, brother, before your Queen takes my head?”

She would seethe at him, even now. Cersei would never be cowed or defeated, not that she would allow anyone to see, and the part of him that had loved her so long rejoiced in that fact. “Is it betrayal to save the realm from burning at the hands of a Mad Queen?” He took a step forward, and then stopped. Jaime’s arms hung limply at his sides. “I am more sorry than you know,” he said gently, and let himself feel the grief and heartache that was making his stomach roll and clench.

“Sorry?” Her lip curled into a snarl. “You have chosen that mad Targaryen whore over me, and you would speak those words? You are a disgrace. A failure to our name and our House, and I am glad that father is not here to see what you have become.” Cersei stood and her chains rattled. She held her hands out in front of her. “Do you see what your betrayal has wrought? We are ruined, Jaime. Our armies are defeated, the throne is lost, and I am in chains while you, the man who killed that whore’s father, are allowed to walk free. Your apologies mean nothing.”

“I chose the realm,” Jaime told her, “I chose the lives of innocents, and I am not sorry for that. I am sorry that I could not save you. I should not have allowed it to go this far.” That she was in chains ripped at him, tore at the very center of his soul, but he could not alter her fate. “I should have saved you from father, when he tried to betroth you to Loras Tyrell. Perhaps I should have even saved you from Robert, though I believe you would have fought me on it. You wanted to be Queen.”

“Saved me?” She sneered at him. “You could not even save yourself.” Her eyes moved to his right hand and she hissed at him. “You have been less than a man for some time, even before that happened. You were once golden and glorious—”
“And I would have done anything for you,” he shot back. “I loved you most of all. I would have gone anywhere, killed anyone, seven hells, Cersei… the things that I have done in your name…” Jaime looked away, his shame almost too much. “I was blinded by my need to please you, until all else meant nothing, but I should have protected you, and I am sorry.”

“Like you protected Joffrey,” she bit out, “or Myrcella, or Father? What has your protection gotten our family but death and ruin?” She hissed through her teeth at him and turned away. “I should have known you would not choose me in the end. You chose that hideous little beast that killed our mother and in return he killed our father. You have always chosen Tyrion over me, always, and this is what it’s got us.”

“Don’t.” He shook his head at her. “This is not about Tyrion, and it isn’t about father or our children. This is about you and me and the mistakes that we made; the crimes that we will have to answer for, the both of us. When we were children Tyrion worshipped you, his perfect, beautiful sister and you had nothing for him but cruelty. What did he have? A father that could not look at him, a sister that hated him, yes, yes I chose him. He was our little brother, ill-formed and loathed by the world, but he should have had us, both of us.” His jaw clenched and he looked away again. “I did not come here to fight with you.”

“Then leave,” she said, voice low and clipped. “There is nothing you can say that will make me forgive you. This betrayal is too much. You have gone too far this time.”

“This time?” Jaime jerked his gaze back to her face. His eyes widened in astonishment. “What have I ever done but what you have asked? I gave up everything… for you.” A frown drew his brows together. “I joined the Kingsguard, because it was your will. I passed on a life with a wife and children that I could acknowledge, for you. What did you do, Cersei?” He took another step before him as his own ire was piqued. “You sold your soul for that crown, you sold your soul even before that. It was whispered for some time around the Rock that father might agree to a match for me with House Hetherspoon, but Melara died before that could happen, quite unexpectedly and suspiciously as I recall. You didn’t like that, just as you didn’t like that Rhaegar chose another. You would have your crown with Robert, but the slight could not be allowed to pass. You could not have competition for the heirs you would give him, so you made certain that you wouldn’t. Elia, Rhaenys and Aegon paid the price for your jealousy.”

“You’re mad,” Cersei turned away from him. She walked as far as she could, as far as the tether keeping her inside the tent would allow. “I do not kill children. I would not. It was you that pushed Bran Stark from the window, as I recall, not I.”

“Oh, it was indeed.” Jaime’s eyes narrowed. She could never look him in the eye when she was lying, especially about something she felt even a miniscule amount of shame for, it was the only tell he had for all the years they had been alive. “Who was it then that had all of Robert’s bastards slain? It was said to be Joffrey, but I think we both know who was whispering in Joff’s ear. They were innocents; they did not deserve to die for our lives. Too many have paid for our mistakes.”

“You would call our children mistakes?” She turned back to him, eyes flashing. “And you wonder why I never let you be a father to any of them.”

“Never,” he barked, raising his voice over hers. “I would never call the children mistakes, but they should not have happened that way. We condemned them with our lies. That was our mistake. We have destroyed everything that we have touched for the sake of those lies. The realm did not betray you, Cersei. The betrayal was ours and ours alone. I am as much to blame as you are, but I should have stopped it when it seemed there was still a chance. Maybe that is the folly of my hindsight, and we were always doomed, I cannot say. It is too late now.” He gentled his tone. “Saving you is
beyond my power, but one of our children may yet still live. The babe you carry now will not share your fate.”

She blinked at him before her eyes narrowed. “Is that why you have bent the knee? My child would be the price of your allegiance to a foreign usurper? Do you think I would let you have it, after all this?” She bared her teeth at him. “I would sooner rip your lying heart from your chest with my bare hands.”

“Good then, that this is the last we shall see of each other.” Jaime sighed. “I did not trade our child to anyone, but I did ask that it be spared. Queen Daenerys had already made the decision. Be thankful, Cersei, for this small mercy. It is more than you would have given,” and it pained him to speak those words, to even think them, but it is the truth he had come to know.

“You would truly do this,” she whispered. “You would let them take my head, let them take my child, and do nothing to stop it?” There was a part of her that wondered if she might yet win him back to her side. He could still get her out of there, if he was Commander of the Dragon Queen’s armies. They could go away, and come back stronger to take back everything that was stolen from her.

Jaime lowered his gaze. “I would have followed you anywhere, Cersei, if you had but bent a little. You would not, and it was within me that I felt us break. I will pay for my part in this, and I may yet meet the Stranger before you do, but I cannot be the man you want me to be. I can only be the man that I am.”

“Then go,” she told him, voice hard again. “I do not want you here. I will not tolerate the presence of traitors.” Cersei turned and gave him her back, she stood tall and proud, despite the chains at her wrists.

“Good bye, sister.” He ground his teeth together and fought the urge to reach for her. He would not, could not, even now, or he would be lost. Jaime turned away from her and walked to the opening, he paused for just a moment to glance back, but she had not moved. Cersei would not give, and that had been her downfall. It could not be his.

Jaime left the tent, and with every step that took him farther away, he mourned what was lost. What likely never was.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the "I am a Lannister and therefore will muck it up when trying to help those I care about" and "You know nothing, Jon Snow" clubs. They are trying to help, so they can still have cookies later.

While this fic is mostly Jaime & Brienne centric, and I luv that Lion, he is going to have to come to terms with some of his wrongs. Guilt is one thing, atonement is another. Poor Naughty Lion, and his Lady Knight isn't even there yet. Too bad Westeros doesn't have counselors, because the old gods & the new know he needs one, especially with those lingering dragon issues. :)

Anyway, enter Willas Tyrell. It was crazy-making that they limited House Tyrell to Olenna, Mace, Loras, and Margaery... I get it, but ugh! What of the backstory of Tyrell vs Martell? Of the correspondence between Oberyn & Willas despite their families' animosity and their own history? Oh but the layers that would have added when Oberyn fought Gregor. #JustSaying

Thank you all again for all the comments!
She likes me, she likes me not...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 14

When Jaime returned to his tent he was not surprised to find Tyrion waiting for him. His brother held up two cups and a very full flagon of wine. “I brought the good stuff.” He was seated at the table, and with Jaime’s return, he placed both cups on the surface and filled them. “Only the best Dornish Strongwine for my big brother on a night such as this.”

He was not in the mood to be around anyone, but Jaime crossed to the table and slumped into the chair across from Tyrion’s. When had the extra chair been added, he wondered idly. Daven or Addam must have had it fetched earlier, when the squires were readying his tent. Jaime pushed those thoughts aside and reached for the wine. He lifted it to his mouth and drained the cup in only moments. When he was done, while the strongwine was still burning the back of his throat and warming him all the way down, Jaime held the cup out for more. “She is lost,” he said quietly, “truly. There is no more hope.”

Tyrion regarded his brother for a moment. Poor bastard, he thought, but did not give voice to it. “You always think the best of us. You are the only one in this family that ever thought any of us was worth saving.” Tyrion filled his brother’s cup again before leaning back in his chair.

“But when it came time to actually save any of you…” Jaime stared into his cup. His shoulders were slumped in defeat. “I failed, time and again.” He lifted the cup between them. “Jaime Lannister, Heir to Casterly Rock, Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, Warden of the West, and useless sod who could not save his family from their own worst impulses because he was too busy indulging in his own worst impulses. Long may he reign.”

He was deep in his self loathing and Tyrion knew that there was little reasoning with him when he was like this. “You saved me,” he said quietly. “I would not have survived my childhood had it not been for you. I would have been executed for Joffrey’s murder, if not for you. I would not be here at all, if not for my big brother, who is not a useless sod. A pain in the ass, perhaps… most definitely, with questionable taste in women, and do not glare at me so.” Tyrion smirked at the dark look that had passed his brother’s face, “I am speaking entirely of our sister. I like the new one, quite a lot, actually. I only wish she wasn’t so bloody tall.”

Jaime snorted but the smile that graced his lips did not reach his eyes. “You wish everyone wasn’t so bloody tall,” he reminded him. “I’m glad you like her,” he capitulated. “I like her too, and I don’t mind that she’s so bloody tall.”

“I should hope not.” Tyrion grinned into his wine cup. “That would make for an awkward conversation.” He watched his brother closely, but the merriment just did not reach beyond the surface. “No where is it written, brother, that to pay for your misdeeds you must be unhappy. Why not let your Lady Knight, whose honor is greater than any we have ever known, help guide your way forward. Surely she would not oppose such a task. I have seen the two of you together; you were happy with her, I did not imagine that. I have seen you look at our sister, and I have seen you look at your Brienne. The two do not compare. There is a difference between obsession and love, and I think now you will know it, truly.”

“I do not deserve her,” Jaime grumbled quietly. It was hard to reconcile in his head that such a
creature as her could belong with him. She was far too good, better than he would ever be. Had this very day not proven that he was the worst possible choice she could make? “I do not know why she sees the good in me,” he admitted, “it is not there.”

“It is,” Tyrion frowned at him. “The good in you is why you feel so abysmally about all that has happened. It is why you want to save Cersei, even when you know she is lost. It is why you will do what you can to put right all the wrongs that have happened in the name of House Lannister, despite knowing they can never truly be right again. You do not deserve her,” he agreed, “if you lived a thousand lifetimes, you would not deserve her, but none of us ever truly deserve the gifts that the gods bestow on us. We must earn them, even if it takes our whole lives.”

He did not want to think or talk about Brienne at the moment, because he already ached for her, and grief for Cersei was only compounding everything. He chose to change the subject instead. “Why did you get to be so wise?” Jaime stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed them at the ankles. He glowered at his brother. “Why couldn’t I be the wise Lannister? Wouldn’t that have been a nice change?”

“Absolutely not,” Tyrion scoffed. “You got the be the tall, handsome, strong Lannister. I got to be the far more handsome and wise one. We all have our crosses to bear, this was mine; you will just have to make do with what you have.”

Jaime snorted. “In no lifetime will you ever be more handsome than I am,” he pointed out.

“So this is what the two of you golden shits talk about when you’re alone together? Women and your own pretty faces?” Bronn considered the pair of them from where he stood near the tent opening. “You really are a couple of arrogant cunts.”

Tyrion looked surprised to see him. Jaime was only resigned. “Didn’t I mention that Bronn is here?” The elder Lannister shrugged. “Oh, well, Bronn is here, and he isn’t getting Highgarden by the way.”

“Why isn’t he getting Highgarden?” Tyrion looked between the two and wondered if he should have brought a guard, or called for a guard with Bronn lurking about the camp.

“There have been developments,” Jaime explained simply. “Highgarden is no longer available.”

“So that means,” Bronn interrupted, “that you two miserable fucks are going to have to find another way to pay off your debt. You owe me a castle.”

“Why do they owe you a castle?” Arya slipped by him and walked to the table. There wasn’t another chair, but there was an empty water pail near the corner of the tent, where the basin of water had been set up for washing. She flipped it over with her foot and slid it closer to the table. “Did you really only bring two cups?”

“We weren’t expecting company,” Jaime told her. “Actually, I wasn’t expecting company, Tyrion was uninvited, but that’s usually the way it is with brothers. Now that I think about it, why are you here?”

“The maester gave Clegane milk of the poppy,” Arya told him, and frowned as she looked around for another cup, surely there must be at least one more in that tent. She found what she was looking for near the bed and tossed the water that was in it into the basin before rejoining them at the table and filling it with wine. “Jon is with Daenerys, Davos is with Lord Selwyn and some of the Stormlanders,” she explained, and took a seat on the overturned pail, “and I don’t know anyone else.”
Jaime considered that for a second before turning back to his brother. “I think she likes me.”

“I don’t like you,” Arya gave him a bland look. “You’re a Lannister. No one actually likes you.”

“Too right about that,” Bronn snorted. He wandered closer to the table and looked down at it. “They really don’t plan for company, do they?”

Arya glanced up at him, face screwing into a look of mixed disgust and puzzlement. “Who is the greasy shit?”

“Ser Bronn of the Blackwater,” he stated, and gave her a bow. That usually did it for most people, especially the ladies. This one didn’t look like she was anything special, though, but he supposed she must be if she was hanging about with Lannisters.

She looked first at Jaime and then Tyrion. Her face was completely blank. “Is that supposed to be important? Should he be on my list?”

Jaime’s brows shot up as he turned to Tyrion. “That would be convenient, and he did try to kill us.” He turned back to Arya. “Cersei paid him to, actually, if that helps.”

“Convenient, yes,” Tyrion sighed. “But it wouldn’t fix anything. Getting out of our debts isn’t exactly paying our debts, and a Lannister always pa—”

“Always finds a way to stiff a man out of the castle that he’s owed,” Bronn finished for him. “These two,” he told Arya, “are a couple of grifters. They talk a good game about paying their debts, and yet here I am,” he held his arms out to his side, “without the gold or the castle that this one,” he poked Jaime’s shoulder, and none too gently, “promised me.”

“I paid you.” Jaime rubbed his injured shoulder with a scowl. “I gave you quite a lot of gold, truth be told. It isn’t my fault that you lost it fighting a dragon and a hoard of Dothraki.”

“But I’ve got no castle,” Bronn reminded him, “and you two fuckers promised me Highgarden. I expect to get Highgarden.”

“You’re not getting Highgarden,” Arya reached for a plate of cheese and fruit at the center of the table. “Are you going to eat this?” She drew it toward her without waiting for a response.

“Why isn’t he getting Highgarden?” Tyrion asked. “You’ve not explained that yet. I don’t think the Queen will disagree with the choice, when I tell her about it. I have it all planned out. I’m going to blame Cersei.”

“As luck would have it,” Jaime explained, “the Lannisters cannot give Highgarden away, because we don’t exactly have it any longer. When it comes to wiping out entire Houses it would seem that this generation does a rather poor job of it. Willas Tyrell is still alive.” He lifted his wine cup in Arya’s direction. “There will be no songs written about my ruthlessness, that’s for sure. My father would be very disappointed in me.”

“He would, that was poorly done,” Arya agreed. “Not that you should have done it, but it was poorly done anyway, and that was taking it with an entire army.” She clucked her tongue at him. “I took the Twins alone and did a better job than you did.”

“You killed the bloody Freys?” Bronn’s eyes had gone wide as he stared at her. “You’re the bloody ghost of the Riverlands?”

“They were on my list,” she shrugged. “You know, I was Lord Tywin’s cup bearer for a little
while,” she turned her attention back to Jaime, “but that’s another story. You actually owe me one.”

“Too right you are.” He leaned back in his chair. A smirk was curving his lips upward. “It actually begins with my spectacular defeat at Whispering Wood—”

“Oh, so you’ll pay your debts to her, but what am I supposed to do?” Bronn glowered at him. “Who the fuck is she anyway?”

“Arya Stark,” she told him, sounding bored.

“The Hero of Winterfell,” Tyrion added for her. He lifted his cup in her direction. “Savior of us all.”

“You’re having me on.” Bronn stared at her. “You’re telling me this little girl killed the king of those dead fuckers?”

“I wouldn’t have called her that,” Jaime muttered.

The corners of Arya’s mouth twitched. They lifted in a small smile. “Want me to show you how?” She drew her dagger slowly and lifted it, played with it between her fingers. “It starts with a story I heard once, about how Valyrian Steel can peel the flesh right off a man’s body, like peeling the skin off a peach. Shall we try?”

There was a hard, flinty look in her grey eyes, as though they were reflecting the very color of the Valyrian steel in her hands. When her eyes swept the length of his body he knew she was calculating how long it would take her to follow through on her suggestion. Bronn knew killers, and this didn’t seem like one he wanted to mess with. He backed up slowly. “Come to think of it, I saw some boys earlier that I know. We were going to get a drink. I shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

An almost amused gleam managed to fill Jaime’s eyes as he watched Bronn back his way, carefully, out of the tent. He could almost, almost forget his earlier misery. It was still there, however, a seething, writhing creature in his chest that could swallow him whole if he allowed it to. He wouldn’t, couldn’t give Cersei the satisfaction of knowing she had pulled him down with her.

“Where was she,” Jaime said instead, “when he was threatening us at Winterfell?”

Arya’s eyes narrowed. “He threatened you at Winterfell?”

“There was a crossbow,” Tyrion said, “and he broke my nose!”

“The nose wasn’t broken,” Jaime rolled his eyes. “It was injured, surely, and I am certain that it was painful. It definitely bled enough, but it was not broken. He did try, however,” he added when Tyrion scowled at him.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Arya was scowling at Jaime now.

His head rolled and he grinned at Tyrion. “I told you, she likes me.” Poking fun at the little wolf was probably going to get him skewered with that thin little sword of hers, but it was rather amusing.

“You’re an idiot.” Arya rolled her eyes at him and reached for the flagon of wine. “You’re lucky that I allow you to live, I don’t have to like you for that,” she spat. “We let you stay at Winterfell, we offered you guest right, and you fought for our home. That’s important. We’re not Freys, we won’t have people threatening you in our home, even if you are Lannisters.”

“I am still contemplating the part where Willas Tyrell is alive,” Tyrion said, drawing the conversation back to matters of actual substance. “I thought all of the Tyrells, except Lady Olenna, were in the
“So did I,” Jaime shrugged. “Apparently they were not. Cersei missed one, and obviously I never checked. It was bad enough Cersei had done it; I didn’t especially spend time checking to see if the families wiped out were truly wiped out. I suppose I should have done.”

“You should have done a lot of things,” Arya wrinkled her nose at him. “That was in very bad taste.” She reached for the bread on the plate at the center of the table and broke off a hunk of it. “I’m not especially pained that the Sept is gone. That’s where your precious Joffrey ordered Ilyn Payne to take my father’s head. He was on my list too, you know,” she added casually.

“Then he still is,” Jaime told her. “He was one of the men left to garrison Highgarden. I’ve ordered my men to leave the castle and return to my army here.” His gaze moved to Tyrion. “The men of the Reach who choose to stay will be told they can, anyone else can go home, or stay with my army.”

“No, I took him off the list.” Arya shrugged at them. Her vengeance wasn’t blind. She had come to realize that Payne was only the weapon and it was Joffrey and Cersei who were responsible for her father’s death. “My list is done now,” she said quietly.

There was silence for a moment. It seemed a rather important statement and the brothers exchanged a look, sharing a shrug at the young girl’s introspection. It was Jaime who finally broke the silence when he leaned forward to reach for the wine and top off his own cup. “We’re going to need more. I have squires, somewhere…” He frowned as he looked toward the opening of his tent and they did not just appear. “Where is Podrick when we need him?”

“Serving a better knight than you,” Tyrion told him.

“Indeed he is.” Jaime stood up and took the flagon to the opening. He flung the flap back and peered into the night. He spied the boys sitting near the fire some yards from his tent. “There you are. More wine,” he told them, “and bring another chair for the lady, and hard meat, if there is any, to go with the cheese.”

“So, that wily old Thorn,” Tyrion continued, still trying to wrap his mind around the news of the hour. “kept her last remaining grandson hidden, and with good reason. She must have known there was going to be retaliation once word got out that she had backed House Targaryen. She probably knew what Cersei was going to do even before you did.” Tyrion frowned. “This is an unpleasant complication, politically speaking of course.”

“I think Olenna had stopped guessing at what Cersei might do after the Sept,” Jaime reclaimed his seat. “She said as much. I should have stopped her at that point, I know, and I probably should have stopped her when she made plans to take Highgarden, but I didn’t, and here we are.”

“Here we are.” Tyrion sighed. “That is another fine mess for me to clean up for you, brother, and I can’t begin to think of how I am going to go about it.”

“I’m not asking you to clean it up for me,” Jaime scowled at him. “I am quite capable of cleaning up my own messes.” His gaze shot to Arya when she snorted. “I am! I’ve already sent word to Highgarden and Dorne, where Willas has gone to raise a force to take back his ancestral home. The Queen will invite the Lords of the Reach to come to King’s Landing and bend the knee. I expect Willas to be among them, he will be expecting to retain his family’s position as Lord Paramounts of the Reach and Wardens of the South. After all, they were loyal to House Targaryen until the end. They backed Aerys and Rhaegar during Robert’s Rebellion, and Olenna threw in with the Dragon Queen when she brought her armies across the Narrow Sea. House Tyrell proved its loyalty, so I do not see an issue. Lord Willas and I will treat as neighboring Wardens, and attempt to come to some
“What agreement do you think that you, the man who stole his bannermen to your side, seized his home, and killed his grandmother, think you can provide to Lord Willas Tyrell that will prevent him from asking Queen Daenerys for your head?” Tyrion shook his head at his brother. “This is going to require a very careful sort of negotiation, and no offense brother, you have many talents, but that is not one of them.”

“I beg to differ,” Jaime argued. “It was not Cersei who convinced the Lords of the Reach to alter their allegiance, it was me. I got us Randyll Tarly, and that got us the rest of the region.” He rubbed his hand over his face and scratched at his beard. “Willas has always been a reasonable sort. He is not quick tempered or in any way impetuous. I will speak to his good sense, and when that fails, as I am sure that it will… after all, I did manage to disrupt centuries of loyalty, and our House did destroy his… I will offer gold and land, and though it pains me to say it, quite likely a marriage contract for one of our unmarried cousins.”

Tyrion leaned forward slowly. “You are going to give him Silverhill.” He stared at his brother and was quite certain their father was rolling in his grave, if he’d had a grave left. “Are you mad?”

“No, I am attempting to pay a debt that can never be paid,” Jaime sighed. “House Tyrell has wanted Silverhill and the land around it for centuries. As Warden of the West I am in a position to negotiate that trade now. The silver mines are going to be a loss, but we will never be able to pay back what we took from Highgarden in gold, so it is at least a reasonable offer and not a paltry one. House Serrett has been all but wiped out, but there is one young son left, and a decent garrison, if I recall correctly. If that is not enough to broker a peace alliance between our two Houses…”

“I’ll have the Queen legitimize Joy,” Tyrion said suddenly, his mind already working over all of the alternatives. “She is of age now. She is a direct cousin, though a bastard, but Willas knows our family well enough to understand how fond we are of Uncle Gerion’s daughter. I would have had her legitimized anyway, at some point, either with Tommen or Daenerys, depending on how things had worked out.”

Jaime nodded. “Father should have done it long ago.” The brothers had shared a love of their lost Uncle Gerion, and the daughter he left behind had not deserved to remain a bastard for so long.

Arya sneered at both of them. “Women are not slaves to be traded for marriage alliances. I thought the point of you bringing your Dragon Queen here,” she said to Tyrion, “was to break the wheel and fix the way things are. Giving your cousin away to some man isn’t fixing anything but your own problems.”

“Perhaps not,” Tyrion agreed, “but marriage is a contract, and it has long been used as a way of brokering alliances between noble families. That does not make it right, but it is the way of nobility, at least for now. We cannot make every change over night. There must be peace in Westeros, and marriage alliances will help us to create that peace.”

“And if Joy is completely opposed,” Jaime told her, “then I will not allow it. As Head of our House, I will need to make a match for her. I will put the idea to Joy, through our Aunt Genna, who has long cared for her, and get their thoughts on the matter. It isn’t a terrible idea, though. I believe Joy and Willas share quite a few hobbies.” He glanced at his brother, “The horses,” he said simply.

“My thoughts too,” Tyrion nodded. “Which is why I think it should be Joy and not any of the other simpering fools.”

The squires returned with a refilled flagon of wine and a plate of hard meat and bread. “Better,”
Jaime nodded at them. “Be sure to stay nearby, we may have need of you later.” He reached for the wine and topped off all of their cups. “When I squired for Barristan Selmy, I don’t think I slept properly for more than a week. Although I’m certain part of that was his attempt to determine if Tywin Lannister’s son would really do all of his bidding.”

“Did you?” Arya looked genuinely curious. She hadn’t known that he had once squired for Barristan the Bold.

“Most of it. I caught on after a while, much to the great amusement to the rest of the Kingsguard that were involved with stopping the Kingswood Brotherhood.” He leaned back in his chair, a small smile at his lips. Those had been simpler and better days. “I don’t think I actually felt like a true Knight again until the War of the Five Kings,” he admitted, “when I was fighting your brother in the Riverlands.” As he settled, he recalled that he intended to tell her that story before Bronn had interrupted them. “Father had given me half his forces,” he began, “and we had managed to successfully lay siege to Riverrun and cut off any support the Stark army might have from House Tully…”

Over the course of the next few hours, while they finished off the wine, and Arya and Tyrion polished off the meat and cheese, Jaime told the story of his sound defeat in the Riverlands and his imprisonment by the Starks. He concluded the tale with his release into Brienne’s custody by Lady Catelyn, as he believed the rest of the story was much hers as his, and he did not feel comfortable telling it without Brienne present.

Afterward, once his guests had gone and Jaime had finally dismissed his squires for the night, he contemplated sleep but found himself outside instead. He leaned against one of the tent’s poles and cast his gaze to the night sky. He stood in that place watching the constant glow and sparkle of a familiar star while his mind wondered over worries of the present and future.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

I posted a bonus chapter tonight because you all have been so awesome, and I don't know when I'll post again this week. I'm in the middle of writing Chapter 21, but it's going to be a busy workweek for me, so I'm not sure when I'll get the additional finished chapters edited.

This was one of my favorite chapters to write. Jaime Lannister vs Stark Ladies is my weakness, especially Arya. Tropes galore, I think, but I cannot help myself.

I've been listening to basically the same few songs on repeat while I've been writing this fic, chief among them is "Curly Sue" by Takida. Lyrics If Jaime is pining a little too much, this song is the cause. :-)

I'm head over heels, goddess of mine
Your curls touching my face and now I can fly
You brought my life back
The glory you found, I'm in deep debt, without you I wouldn't survive
I'm not ever alone
To go south

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Traveling the Kingsroad in winter was, at best, difficult, but at worst it was foolish. Winter was not a time for leaving one’s Keep, their father had always said. It was a time for keeping your people close, looking out for one another, and being grateful for what you had while you prayed to the Gods for a new spring. Sansa thought of that as her small host of guards and household moved ever southward. The snow and ice had slowed their movements, but the worst of the weather was not yet upon them, and as they crossed the Neck, Sansa knew that the more dangerous storms would remain behind them.

They had not brought more guards than Ser Brienne thought they might need to keep their party safe. What an odd little party they must look like, too, Sansa thought. Besides herself, Brienne and Podrick, there was also Bran and the two young guards who assisted her brother and kept him safe. Gendry had joined them, as his presence would be needed as the new Lord of Storm’s End. They had brought Samwell Tarly with them, and his small family. Sansa had thought to leave them at Winterfell, to help care for her people, but Bran thought Jon might want them in the south. Sam was a southron boy, after all, and the heir to Horn Hill. Sansa wasn’t sure how that would work, neither was Sam, truly… for he was also sworn to the Night’s Watch, but he gladly bundled his family up and came along with them.

A few days into the trip, Sansa was glad that he had. Gilly was a fountain of knowledge when it came to surviving in the winter months. Sansa had directed all of her men to listen to the young wildling woman, and do exactly as she instructed. It would be the difference in surviving their trip south or having their bodies burned on the hard, frozen ground of the north.

To guard them they had a host of twenty-five strong, northern men, all sworn to House Stark. They also had another twenty-five Knights of the Vale. The rest of their guards and soldiers, Sansa had left behind to protect her home and people. There were others with them as well, Lady Jorelle Mormont, who had gladly agreed to become Ser Brienne’s new squire, the Lady of Winterfell’s handmaidens, and a couple of cooks. Tormund Giantsbane had tried to send one of his young hunters with them, but Sansa had declined. None of the free folk had ever been south of Winterfell, except Gilly, and Sansa worried that the boy would not fare well. In truth, she worried more about how the Southron people would treat him.

As they left The Neck behind and moved into the Riverlands, Sansa felt a small smile curving at her lips. She did not like the idea of being so far from her home, but she pushed her worries aside and chose to trust her stalwart guards to keep her safe. On this particular day she had chosen to ride at the front of their column with Sers Brienne and Podrick. She was thinking about the last time the three of them had traveled together, and as dark as those days had been, there were some moments she could think back upon with fondness.

“Perhaps we could leave them all behind?” Sansa gave voice to the foolish, fanciful thoughts playing at the back of her mind. To the North and the rest of the Six Kingdoms she might appear as cold and frozen as the ice of the Lands of Forever Winter. There were precious few to whom she would show glimpses of her true self, and two of them were riding beside her. “We could ride ahead, just the three of us.” As they rode, her horse, a strong, northern animal built for the cold weather, moved closer to Brienne’s. Their knees touched and Sansa shared a small smile with the other woman. Ser Brienne did not smile often, and her Lady supposed most would not recognize the expression for
what it was, but she had come to know her sworn sword well. The smile was there in the softening of her eyes, the way the color darkened a bit, and how they wrinkled slightly at the corners. It was in the way the corners of her mouth twitched and then her lips pursed, as though she was trying hard to suppress the very smile that was threatening to blossom.

“It would be the four of us now,” Brienne replied, “but I dare say, I do believe Lady Jory is quite a bit better at lighting a fire on the frozen ground.” It was a bit of an odd thing, having a squire that was also a Lady, but Jorelle Mormont had not balked at the idea. The women of Bear Island were cut from much stronger, sterner cloths than any of those Brienne had ever encountered in the south. She had taken to her tasks with a determination that reminded all of them of the late Lady Lyanna Mormont, and reminded Brienne of both girls’ elder sister, Lady Dacey, though Brienne had not known her well.

A sense of warmth filled Sansa, spreading out from her chest to warm the rest of her at the gently teasing look that Brienne cast at Podrick, on her other side. Sansa turned her gaze to him and almost laughed out right at the way his cheeks colored. As she heard him mutter about the wood having been wet on that grey, snowy day, Sansa marveled that the young man that had once stammered in her presence was now a knight in his own right. She could still remember him, or how he had been, in King’s Landing, when he had still served Tyrion. She had thought him an odd choice for a squire then, and an even odder one for Brienne, but he had proven her wrong. Sansa thought of his knighting on the evening before they had left Winterfell. A small feast had been held in honor of their departure, and before the eating could begin, Podrick had been called before the high table.

“Podrick Payne, come forward please.” Sansa stood tall and proud beside her seat, hands folded in front of her. She wore a dark, thick, woolen gown, and at her breast a direwolf pin gleamed in the firelight of the torches, braziers, and hearth that lit the Great Hall.

He rose from where he sat near the back of the hall, and after glancing only once at Brienne who stood where she always did, just behind Sansa’s left shoulder, he walked to the front of the hall. His Lady-Ser seemed to stare at him more imperiously than she ever did, and beneath her blue gaze, Podrick felt himself straightening before he turned his full attention to Lady Sansa. “My lady.” He bowed his head in respect.

“Podrick Payne of the Westerlands,” Sansa began, her voice ringing clear and strong in the now quiet hall, “you have served House Stark well and true. On the day your Lady saved me from House Bolton, you were fighting at her side. It is not a day that I shall ever forget. Nor have I forgotten the promise you made to me on the night the army of the dead came to our walls. Do you recall the words we spoke before I sent you to stand with the rest of our army on that night?”

“Y-yes my lady.” He stammered quietly and felt his gaze drift to Ser Brienne again, but she only arched a brow at him. If she already knew of the conversation he’d had with their Lady, she gave no indication of it. Podrick stood a little straighter and squared his shoulders. He met Lady Sansa’s clear blue gaze. “You will stay at her side Podrick Payne,” he spoke clearly now, those staring at him forgotten as he called on a strength he had only felt a few times in his life. He felt it on the day they fought off Littlefinger’s men, and again when they battled the Bolton guards to protect Lady Sansa. It was a warmth, clawing inside him, threatening to burst forth. It had gotten him through the long night, pushing him onward every time he thought he was done, it was there, guiding his sword and bringing him through the darkest battle that any of them had ever known. “You will shield her back, as she has shielded mine, with honor, and grace, and bravery. I am the Lady of Winterfell, she is my sword, my shield, and my friend. Do that, Podrick Payne, see our Knight returned to my side and I shall not ever forget it. The North remembers.”

“The North remembers,” Sansa stated, and bowed her head in a regal nod. There was a low
murmur as all those who were men, women, and children of the north echoed her words throughout the hall. They knew the words, lived by them, fought by them, and would die by them. “I have heard the stories of that long, dark night told by the brave survivors that fought for my home, for our very lives against the creatures of our worst nightmares, and I have not forgotten that a promise was made, and that a promise was kept.” She turned her head, just an inch, and with her gaze never leaving Podrick, she gave a brief nod.

Brienne moved then, and with her head held high and her back straight, she rounded the table to approach him. “Kneel, Podrick Payne.”

She had drawn Oathkeeper as she spoke and Podrick felt his mouth go dry. He swallowed hard past the sudden tightness in his throat and fought back the warmth that was suddenly stinging behind his eyes. He slowly lowered himself to one knee and looked up at her, seeming so impossibly tall, his eyes wide and trusting. He drew a short, shuddering breath when he felt Oathkeeper touch his shoulder for the first time.

“In the name of the Warrior, I charge you to be brave...” Her voice was just as strong and unwavering as she always was. Podrick felt his heart hammering against his chest, and he wondered if this is what she must have felt that night, when Ser Jaime had spoken the words to her. It felt like he was living in a dream. Podrick had stopped expecting this day to ever happen, and in truth he wondered if he would ever be worthy. He was just a boy from the West, from a forgotten branch of a minor House. He was no one of importance, and certainly no one near as brave or true as Ser Brienne. She had deserved this so much more than he, but when he met her gaze, her eyes were lit with pride, and he felt his heart swell with happiness.

“Arise, Ser Podrick,” her voice had almost faltered then, almost, but she had managed the words without embarrassing them both. Brienne felt more pride than she thought she would when she added, “A knight of the seven kingdoms.”

He stood slowly, and there was a mix of applause and the sound of cups being banged against tables as those gathered celebrated his rise. “Thank you,” he said quietly, and though he might have imagined it, Podrick thought he saw just the slightest wobble of her chin before she nodded back at him and turned to go back to Lady Sansa’s side.

“In the North,” Sansa said when he turned back to her, “we have different ways of honoring our brave warriors than Knighthood, though you have surely earned that honor.” She bent slightly and lifted a bundle that had been hidden in her chair throughout the proceedings. Sansa held it in her hands for a moment, her long fingers pale against the dark leather. Then she turned it over and the gleaming silver metalwork, finely wrought in a hand that could only be Gendry’s, shone brightly in the light of the fires. It was in the shape of the proud direwolf of House Stark. “I would be honored, Ser Podrick, if you would wear this with pride and bravery.”

Podrick slowly drew his own sword. He knelt again and placed it on the stones in front of him. There was no hesitation in him at all as he spoke the words his Lady-Ser had once spoken so proudly. “I offer my services, Lady Sansa. I will shield your back and keep your counsel, and give my life for yours if need be. I swear it, by the Old Gods and the New.”

The corners of Sansa’s mouth turned up, just ever slightly. This time she knew the words and would not stammer at them, and they came from her heart more surely than they had before, for this time she knew better that those sworn to her were the bravest and truest shields she could ask for. “And I vow that you shall always have a place at my hearth, and meat and mead at my table.” Her chin lifted with the same pride that sparkled in her eyes. “And I pledge to ask no service of you that might bring you dishonor. I swear it by the Old Gods and the New. Arise, Ser Podrick.” She held the
bundle toward him. “Knight of Winterfell.”

There had been no time to have armor made for him, but he wore the leather jerkin proudly, and Sansa had promised herself that she would have armor made for him when they reached King’s Landing. She already had the name of the best shop on the Street of Steel from Gendry. What she had managed to make for Podrick was the fur cloak that adorned his shoulders. It had been waiting in his quarters the night of the feast, where she had bid one of her handmaidens to leave it for him. The North would know that those who served her were hers, and that they were valued and true. She liked to imagine her father would be proud of her for that, even if he could not be proud of her for other things that she had done for the sake of her family, her house, and their home. She would not lose anyone else, could not or her heart would finally freeze and she would become as cold and hard as she allowed the outside world to perceive her to be.

She was not like Arya and Jon. They lived by a code she could not always fully understand. Sansa knew how important the tenets of honor, truth, and bravery were, but she also understood that the world was not cut from cloths of black or white. She knew the many shades of grey that blanketed the world. Sansa understood that sometimes she had to lie and cheat, and play the game of thrones to protect those she loved, to preserve their honor. She was not always proud of the things she needed to do, and she did not always think she was right, but she would protect her family, and she would protect her people. Her father would be proud of her for that, and he would be proud that she had found people who would guard her back, protect her secrets, and protect those she cared for, just as he had once had Jory Cassel and Hallis Mollen to protect his back.

“We’ll sleep in an inn tonight,” Brienne said, breaking the silence that had settled over them. “It’s the last inn we’ll find until we reach the Crossroads.”

Sansa frowned as she thought of that place. It was where she had lost Lady, and she had been too stupid then to see how ugly and hateful Cersei truly was, how horrid Joffrey was. “I wish we knew more about what was happening in King’s Landing,” she said instead. “We really don’t know what we’re riding toward. I know Bran says the battle was won, but there could still be people loyal to Cersei north of the Crownlands.”

“News of the battle or the happenings in King’s Landing will not have made it this far north yet,” Brienne replied, “but there will be someone at the Crossroads with news, my lady, I am sure of it.” Since they had left Winterfell Bran had only used his Greensight when absolutely necessary. It was harder for him, the further they moved away from the weirwood trees that connected him to the Old Gods. They had been without news of their friends and family in the South since they had left Winterfell, and it was difficult for all of them. Brienne often found herself staring at the night sky each evening, wondering what had become of her father or Jaime, or even Lady Arya and Lord Jon. It was hard to be so far removed from it all, and to know it could be another fortnight before they saw their loved ones again.

“But we are absolutely certain,” Sansa said, and not for the first time, “that it was not safe to take a ship from White Harbor?” It would have been her preferred way to travel. She truly hated the Kingsroad and all of the memories it held for her.

“You would not want to be on the sea during a winter gale, my Lady.” Brienne felt the rise of amusement. She was no fonder of the path that lay before them, and she knew that once they neared Harrenhal she would be facing her own memories of traveling that road.

“But if we did leave them behind,” Podrick said, speaking up for the first time in several minutes, “we could probably travel the distance in half the time.” He cut a look toward Ser Brienne, a small smile at his lips. “I think the three of us, Lady Jory, and two more guards should suffice to keep Lady
Sansa safe.”

The redhead’s brows climbed toward her hairline. Her braid danced against her back as she turned to gauge Ser Brienne’s reaction. It seemed Ser Podrick had been considering her suggestion the entire time, and formulating a plan to make it possible. “It would attract less attention,” she pointed out, the corners of her mouth twitching toward a small smile.

Brienne looked from one to the other of them and almost rolled her eyes. “You realize we would be leaving Lord Bran, Samwell, Gilly, and the rest of the household behind?” Not that they wouldn’t be suitably protected with the remainder of the guards, but she felt duty bound to point that out.

“I do,” Sansa nodded. “Two fully grown men, a woman of some considerable skill at taking care of herself, near fifty knights and guards, and people to care for them all. It would be a hardship, I know.” Her blue eyes danced with amusement. “To be honest, I think they would all be safer if we weren’t with them. You and I are quite recognizable in these lands. You can both keep me safer than a hundred knights, I know it.”

If she wanted to, Sansa could order them to ride ahead. As their Lady, that was her right, but she wouldn’t. Brienne knew that Sansa would defer to her, as she would always put her Lady’s safety first. It was only when Sansa thought her plans might endanger or somehow dishonor her that she would be truly stubborn or feign indifference to Brienne’s concerns or suggestions. She was not stupid, or blindly loyal, she knew her Lady well. Brienne thought about it for a few long moments, while they continued to ride on at a steady pace. She thought through all the consequences and possible complications. Truly, it would probably be safer if they traveled with a smaller host. They could move faster and more easily if they left the road and traveled the countryside, as she and Podrick often had when they traveled together in the days before they were sworn to Lady Sansa.

“It will not be easy,” Brienne warned her. It was important that her Lady fully understand what she was asking. “It will be harder even than our trip to Castle Black was. We will ride each day until it is too dark to do so and stop only for a few hours sleep and to rest the horses. There will be no inns until the Crossroads, and only then if it is safe to stop. You will arm yourself with a dagger, and each morning after we break our fast I will show you how to use it. If we are set upon, it may become necessary for you to defend yourself.”

Sansa did not bristle at her tone. Were it anyone else she would have reminded them of who she was and immediately put them back in their place. This was Ser Brienne, however, who had sworn oaths to her mother and herself to keep her safe. Her knight offered her deference in almost all things except where her safety was concerned. “I understand,” Sansa nodded.

“Very well,” Brienne’s sigh was near to exasperation, but she nodded back. “Podrick, go and tell Ser Derrik that we are parting with his company here. You and I will ride ahead with Lady Sansa and a smaller host.”

“Yes Ser,” Podrick smiled widely as he turned his mount and rode back along their column to find the Vale Knight she spoke of.

“I will tell Bran,” Sansa decided. “I am sure that he will understand. He probably already predicted this,” she sat straighter in her saddle as she turned. “I will have Loren and Matthor join our party,” she decided. The two were Winterfell guards and would serve them well on the road. She would leave all of the Knights of the Vale to look after her brother and the rest of their party.

“That would have been my suggestion too,” Brienne agreed. She turned in her saddle and her eyes found her new squire. The girl was riding several paces behind them; close enough to respond if needed, but far enough to have given them privacy. “Lady Jory, to me.”
She pressed her heels into her strong, chestnut mare and urged her forward so that she was riding along side her Lady-Ser. “You do not have to call me Lady,” she reminded her, and not for the first time. “I am the Lady of Bear Island in name only. I understand that it is proper, but it is not required.”

Her thick, northern accent was so reminiscent of all the late ladies of her family that Brienne fought the urge to smile. “I understand, but when we are with others, as we are now, I do feel it appropriate. That is about to change. We are going to be leaving the larger host behind and riding ahead with Lady Sansa. Ser Podrick and two of the Winterfell guards will join us. I am afraid that you are about to have to learn very quickly what it is to be a squire on the road.”

“I see.” Jory thought about it and nodded. “That sounds quite thrilling, actually. I’ve not been anywhere but Bear Island and then Castle Cerwyn.” She cast a quick look behind them, as though considering the number in their party as it was at present. “We are rather conspicuous like this, aren’t we? I imagine it would be safer for Lady Stark to take her south without attracting too much attention.”

Brienne tilted her head in approval. “Yes, I think so too. Ride back and make certain you have all the supplies you need on you. We will only be taking one of the supply horses. Our travel will be fast and difficult.”

“Yes Ser,” Jory turned her mare immediately and rode quickly back to make certain they would have all the supplies they needed for six people and seven horses to travel south without the benefit of the supply wagon that was in their party. It would not hurt either, she thought, to have the handmaidens add a couple of clean gowns for Lady Sansa to their supplies.

Sansa found Bran riding between his two guards. He had improved upon the saddle design that Tyrion had given him years before, and now rode even more comfortably than he had in the days before Theon and the Ironborn had taken Winterfell.

“You’re finally going then?” Bran looked almost amused when she joined him, or as amused as he ever looked now that he was the Three-Eyed Raven.

“I hate it when you do that,” Sansa made a face at him. “We are,” she answered. “Brienne and I are going to ride ahead. We are taking Podrick, Jorelle and a couple of northmen with us.”

“You are as impatient to see Jon and Arya as Lady Brienne is to see Ser Jaime,” he told her. “We will be quite safe,” he added, “I don’t mind the pace, I am enjoying the ride.” Bran tilted his head at her. “You have no reason to be afraid, Sansa. I know the road bothers you. I know you remember what happened before, and I know that you are worried that Jon will be angry with you. He is still our brother, even if he’s not really, he will understand when you speak to him.” Bran tried to reassure her, but as with anything else, he could not feel reassurance either. “Even when you did not like him much, he took care of you. That does not stop because the truth is known.”

Sansa wondered if she would always feel guilt for how she had treated Jon when they were children. That was all past now, though. He was her big brother, and she wanted only to protect him, and their family, and their home. “I could bear his anger, as long as he is safe. He would not be angry forever, that is not his way. That was never Jon’s way.” A small smile played at her lips. “It was always Robb that held a grudge.”

Bran’s face softened as he remembered. He did not have to use his Greensight to recall much happier days for his family. “Remember when you cut off the end of Arya’s braid, because she had ruined the embroidery on your new gown, and Father made you stay in your room for a week? He and Mother forbade you from going to Harvest Feast, but when you went to sneak out of your room, you
found a tray of roast venison and sweet breads, and the lemon cakes mother had made especially for you.”

“I remember.” Sansa smiled at the memory. “You and Rickon were too young to go to the feast, so I brought the tray to the nursery and the three of us had our own feast. When Father found me there later, he said it would be our secret, and we wouldn’t tell Mother that I had left my room without permission.”

“It was Jon that put the tray outside your door,” Bran told her. “He knew how badly you had wanted to go, and he knew what it felt like to be excluded, even if you had earned the punishment by fighting with Arya. Jon will forgive you. He always does. He could never stay mad at you or Arya for long. There is too much of Father in him for that.”

“I will trust that you are right.” Sansa frowned. “Bran, are you sure that you will be okay if we leave you? We don’t have to go. We can stay with the rest of the group. It is only my own impatience at play with this idea.” She worried for him, as she always did, but did not think she was taking anything away from him by leaving with Brienne and Podrick to ride ahead.

“I traveled beyond the wall without you, Sansa.” Bran smiled at her then, because he knew that she needed him to, although it did not fully reach his dark eyes. “I will have Samwell and Gilly for company,” he said, “and we will all be safe enough with the men you are leaving behind. To them we will look like Lords of the North and the Vale, come to swear fealty to the new Queen for the sake of our lands and Houses. Many will be doing the same in the coming weeks. No one will know that I am Brandon Stark of Winterfell. Most will think you have sent an emissary south, as you did before for the parlay at the Dragonpit. It is safer for you, I think, to go on without us. You are well protected either way, but for your piece of mind, riding ahead is the better choice.”

“Thank you, Bran.” She was more relieved than she would know. “I will see you in King’s Landing, brother. We will be waiting for you, and we will feast when the Starks are once again reunited.”

“Safe travels, sister.” Bran watched her ride forward to rejoin Ser Brienne again. There was a small part of him that understood her impatience. He knew there were bad memories awaiting her in King’s Landing. Sansa would do well to face them sooner, rather than later, he thought.

“Lady Sansa, Ser Brienne,” Gendry joined them at the front of the column while supplies were shifted and the guard repositioned itself accordingly. “Would you mind… that is to say, I know you want to ride fast, but I—”

Sansa exchanged a look with Brienne. They were not the only ones anxious to get moving, it appeared. “Of course, Lord Gendry.” He grimaced every time someone used his new title, but he would have to get used to it eventually. “We would welcome your company and assistance during our travels.”

“Thank you, my Lady.” Gendry nodded to both of them before dropping back to help Podrick make the arrangements for their departure from the larger host.

“You’re right,” Sansa observed once he was gone. “He does look more like Lord Renly than King Robert.” She watched her knight frown, and wondered at that. She tried to recall the few rumors she had heard about Brienne and Renly in those days following the Battle of the Blackwater, when Queen Margaery and Ser Loras had first come to King’s Landing, but found it was all still a jumble of whispers and terror. “I think it’s something more in the bearing than his features. King Robert was always so loud and boisterous; he was quite obnoxious really. Lord Renly was quiet and thoughtful, and always kind.”
“King Renly,” the words left Brienne’s mouth quickly, and out of habit. She turned her gaze away from where Gendry had gone and frowned at the clouds gathering to the east. “You are correct, I think. It is his manner that reminds me of Renly, though I never met King Robert.”

“Hm.” Sansa hummed thoughtfully. “Are we certain that he is Robert’s bastard?” Her brows lifted curiously. “Not that it would matter if he is Renly’s, he will still be the Lord of Storm’s End, but it would explain a lot.”

“I am certain.” Brienne sighed. She met her Lady’s gaze again and jerked a single shoulder in a partial shrug. “You heard the rumors about Renly and Ser Loras?” When her Lady nodded, Brienne looked away again. “They were true.”

Sansa found that she was not surprised. “That might have been inconvenient.” She rolled her eyes. “I was to marry Ser Loras, once. Lady Olenna and Queen Margaery tried to arrange it, although Lady Olenna did mention once that she thought I would be happier with her eldest grandson, Lord Willas. I think the idea was to marry me off quickly, so that I could leave King’s Landing, and Ser Loras was already there.” She frowned. “Lord Tywin had other ideas, obviously.”

“Obviously.” Brienne’s lips turned down. While Sansa was being married to Tyrion, Jaime was losing his hand in the Riverlands. Would that they could have gotten to her sooner, but it was not to be. She looked behind them, searching for Podrick. When she found him, she held up a hand, indicating she wanted to be moving in another five minutes. Once he nodded, she went back to watching the horizon. If they rode as quickly as she expected, they could make it well past the inn at the road to the Twins before they needed to stop for the night. If the weather did not turn they could make it to the Crossroads in but a few days, less than a sennight surely.

That they could be in King’s Landing in less than a fortnight filled her with a renewed sense of energy, and urgency. Days, it would be days instead of weeks. She truly hoped that Jaime could keep himself out of trouble for that long, but Brienne did not expect he was capable.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

I'm filling my boat with nothing but happy fangirl tropes and if I go down with them on my way to happy fangirl island, I can totally handle that. :)

It's just... if anyone else besides Jaime and Pod (ahem, and us!) know how freaking totally awesome Brienne is... Sansa does. Okay. Sansa does!

The idea of calling him "Knight of Winterfell" comes from the "Knights of the Vale". If the Vale can have their own knights, why can't she?
It had been almost the full turn of a moon since they had taken the city, and with it, the rule of the Seven Kingdoms. Repairs were underway to the walls that had been damaged during the battle, and to the homes and shops that had burned where the worst of the fighting occurred within the city’s walls. Queen Daenerys had assumed the throne, although the formal coronation would not take place until the great houses had gathered to bear witness and swear fealty.

Cersei was gone, now securely imprisoned at Dragonstone where she would remain until her child was born and she could stand trial for her crimes. None of them had truly felt safe until they had received the raven that the ship carrying her had arrived and was now well guarded. She was a specter that would remain, hovering over their heads until the Queen’s justice could finally be done, but for the time being Tyrion had chosen to put her out of mind, just as she was now out of sight.

As had his brother, Tyrion had gone to see her on the morning that her ship departed. It had not gone well, and that meeting had removed any guilt that remained in his heart for the part he played in taking the throne from her. It was done, there would be nothing gained from looking back.

Already there had been many changes to the way the Kingdoms would be ruled. In the first small council meeting of the new reign changes to the very structure of their government had been proposed and voted upon. Daenerys was both surprised and pleased with the changes brought forth by Lord Selwyn and Lord Jaime. While she still bore no great trust for his brother, a condition that Tyrion did not anticipate changing anytime soon, he had won himself the benefit of her attention by taking the city with so little bloodshed and deposing his own twin.

Tyrion was a bit chagrined to find his role in this new reign far less involved than he originally planned, but he could not disagree with the changes they had made. It would make the realm stronger, in the end, and was that not what they had all been fighting for?

No longer would there be a Hand to the King, or Queen as their case may be. Jaime had used the example of their father, who had ruled through Joffrey and Tommen, to the detriment of both Kings and the realm. Lord Selwyn had even reminded them all that Lord Tywin had once been Hand to King Aerys, and his need for power through the crown had put the realm in danger, for he should have acted when Aerys first began to show signs of madness. The Queen would rule in her own voice, they said, an idea that Daenerys was especially approving of, but she would not rule unchecked.

The Queen’s Small Council would act on behalf of the realm, in addition to the Masters of Laws, Ships, War, and Coin, they would be joined by the Wardens of each land, and seats would still be reserved for the Lord Commander of the Queensguard, and a Grand Maester assigned by the Citadel. In place of a Hand, there would now be a Lord Protector of the Seven Kingdoms who would hold the highest seat on the Council, and act as liaison between the Queen and her Council, and ultimately between the Queen and her realm. No longer would he or she who sat upon the Iron Throne be styled as the protector, for another would hold that position. It was a position that would be voted upon by the Council.

It was a radical idea, to be sure, but even Tyrion had to agree that those changes were doing as Daenerys had always promised, and if not fully breaking the wheel of tyranny that had once ruled the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, then certainly cracking it. As for Tyrion, he would sit on the
Council as Master of Laws, which was a step down from Hand to the Queen, but far better than being reduced to Master of Coin. He would still be a voice that his Queen would need in the coming months and years of her rule, and as he got over the initial disgruntlement of being demoted, Tyrion began to feel quite some relief at no longer carrying the entire Throne and realm upon his small shoulders. He was a good Hand, and he would always believe that he had served his Queen well, but his brother and Lord Selwyn were correct. There was a better way to govern the kingdoms, and if they never attempted change, they would never find it.

Daenerys had named Grey Worm her Master of War during that first meeting, an appointment that the others had agreed upon. The Unsullied and Dothraki might be foreigners in their lands, savages in the eyes of many, but they had served well and true. They had protected the realm against the Night King’s army of dead, and many had been lost fighting that battle. Of her eastern armies, Daenerys was torn. They were the first to have followed her, but Westeros was not their home. They had done all they had promised her, but they were free men. She would not keep them trapped in a land they did not know, and for those who chose to return to Essos, her Master of Ships would find them safe passage. It was a position and task that Ser Davos had accepted gladly. As Master of Ships, he would find himself at sea again, not as often as he might like, but he would need to inspect the ports of their land, and it was a job he felt he was more inclined to perform well.

That had left them needing a Master of Coin, as the Council had readily agreed that they would retire the position of Master of Whispers. A well-ruled kingdom would have no need of spies and rumors. Jon Snow, newly named as Lord Protector of the Seven Kingdoms by both his Queen and the unanimous agreement of their advisors put forth Samwell Tarly for the position of Master of Coin. He would have made a good maester, had he forged his chain, but necessity had kept him from completing his training. While, in truth, he was still sworn to the Night’s Watch, the Black Brothers had all but been wiped out fighting the dead. The Watch would need to be reformed, with Commanders in place that would protect the realm and the Free Folk alike. Sam would be released from his oaths, the Old Gods would understand, Jon told them. He had served them, fighting the dead, and now he would serve in another way. With Sam and Tyrion, two of the smartest men he had ever met both sitting on the Queen’s Small Council, Jon felt the realm would be truly better than it had been.

Ravens were dispatched after that first meeting, sent to all the corners of Westeros to call the Lords and Ladies of the Great Houses before their Queen. While they waited for responses and arrivals, the careful planning continued. It was all going well until it came time to name the other Wardens of their realm. It was Jon that had stated as Lord Protector he could not also serve as Warden of the North. The two positions should remain independent of each other, as they would likely have opposing interests in the future. They could not risk any conflict that may arise having an impact on the rest of the Seven Kingdoms. He proposed that his sister, who was by right and birth, and Bran’s unique circumstances, the heir and Lady of House Stark be named Warden of the North.

Daenerys immediately bristled at the idea, and the Small Council braced for a fight. The Queen insisted there was the matter of Lady Stark’s betrayal to take into consideration, as she had revealed things that were not hers to reveal. Jon’s eyes darkened in response, and whatever peace he and the Queen seemed to have found in the days since the Battle of King’s Landing appeared to crumble before all their eyes.

“Aye,” Jon replied. “A secret that was mine, and mine alone. My sister and I will settle the matter between us. Sansa is my family, and it was me she wronged. What we are doing here is not about family squabbles; it is about protecting the realm. Name me a better person to defend the North than the daughter of Eddard Stark?”

“If it is a daughter of Lord Stark that you want,” Daenerys argued, “then there is another.” Her violet
eyes had narrowed. “Lady Arya is the Hero of Winterfell. She defeated the Night King, I would name her Warden of the North. We will arrange a suitable match for Lady Sansa, she will provide an alliance to the North with another House—”

“You will not…” It was Tyrion and Jaime that had spoken, both brothers sat straight in their chairs and shared a look of surprise to find they agreed on that point. Tyrion had inclined his head at his brother, and the Lord of House Lannister had nodded, giving the Master of Laws the floor.

“Lady Sansa,” Tyrion began, picking his way carefully through a touchy subject and a tense mood, “has already been given in marriage twice against her will. While her marriage to me was in name only, and subsequently dissolved, she was not so lucky the second time. To that end, she spent years as a hostage of the crown, kept here in King’s Landing at the behest and entertainment of King Joffrey and his mother, my dear sister, Cersei. My Queen, I understand that you feel slighted on Lord Snow’s behalf, and no one here will fault you for it,” he said when she glared at him, “but he is your nephew, and Sansa is his cousin by blood, and his sister by the circumstances of his raising.”

“That makes her blood of your blood,” Jaime pointed out quietly, “does it not?” He lifted a brow at her when he drew her gaze to him. “I have known Sansa Stark since she was a child, Your Grace. She is the daughter of Eddard Stark and Catelyn Tully. She has her father’s unwavering honor and her mother’s devotion to family and duty. Whatever betrayal Lady Sansa may have committed, I do not believe it was done with malice.” It was for his oath to Lady Catelyn that he spoke, and his devotion to Brienne. He would not allow her Lady to be harmed or slighted, not if he could prevent it. “Tyrion was once her Lord Husband,” he reminded, “whatever she may have told him of the confidence that Lord Snow shared with her, she was entrusting the safety and protection of her brother to him, a man who once protected her from the deeds of our family.”

Daenerys allowed her gaze to sweep the room. The others were watching her, either with impassive expressions or in agreement with the two Lannisters. When her gaze landed on her uncle, Daenerys tilted her head inquisitively. He did not have a place on the Council, as yet, but she had come to appreciate his advisement. He spoke with wisdom, even if she did not always appreciate his words, and he had gained her respect. “What say you, Uncle? What would you do in my place?”

“We have agreed to let the matter of Jon Snow’s true parentage be known to the realm,” Selwyn stated. “It is no longer a secret to be guarded. That Lord Varys acted as he did was regrettable, but it was not to Lord Varys that Lady Sansa gave the information. I do not know Lady Sansa, but I would agree with the Lord Protector, whatever betrayal or dissension there is between the Lady of Winterfell and the Crown is a matter of family business that should be handled accordingly.”

She turned back to Jon then and the two stared at each other for several long moments. With a sigh, Daenerys finally nodded. “Very well. Lady Sansa of House Stark shall be Wardeness of the North.” When Jon relaxed, she did too. “I do not like that she betrayed your trust,” the Queen stated, “but Lord Jaime is correct. She is blood of my blood, and we will handle the matter privately as you see fit.”

“May I have that in writing?” Jaime had smirked at them in a poor attempt to lift the mood in the room.

“You may not,” The Queen cast an imperious look at him before holding out a hand to Lord Tyrion. “We shall have something else in writing instead. I made a promise to you, Jon Snow, and I will see it done now. I know that you would probably prefer to have the rest of your family present for this, but I feel it has already been delayed far too long.” She shared a small smile with Tyrion as the document was placed in her hand. Daenerys laid it on the table before her and smoothed it out. The parchment had been carefully worded and etched and already her seal was upon it. “I, Daenerys
Stormborn of House Targaryen, the First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals and the First Men…” She had intended to stop there, but from the corner of her eye she caught sight of Lord Jaime rolling his eyes toward the ceiling and bracing for the full litany of her titles. Her brow arched and amusement sparked in her eyes. “The Mother of Dragons, the Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, the Unburnt,” she continued for his benefit alone and took a good deal of enjoyment from the little ways that she found to annoy the Lord of House Lannister, the man who had killed her father, and remind him that he served at her pleasure, and hers alone. “…and the Breaker of Chains, do hereby name the man known as Jon Snow, former Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, proclaimed King in the North, and once Warden of the North, born Aegon of House Targaryen to be known henceforth as Jon Stark of Winterfell, Lord Protector of the Seven Kingdoms.”

Jon accepted the document from her, and if he knew his hand shook as he took it, he gave no sign of it. “Thank you, Your Grace.” He stared, as though lost in her eyes for a moment before his finally dropped to the parchment in his hand. Jon looked as though he had never been given a greater treasure, and certainly there were things in life more important than a name, but for as long as he could remember, the one thing he had wanted more than anything was to be a Stark of Winterfell. He had longed to be Ned’s son and Robb’s brother in more than just blood, but that was never to be. He knew now why that was, and though learning the truth of his birth had turned his life upside down, Jon felt that he was beginning to come to terms with it.

There was a part of him that would likely never forgive Ned Stark for the lie, but he was grateful for his life, and he was thankful for the time he had with Robb, Sansa, Arya, Bran, and Rickon. They would always be his brothers and sisters, and though he had heard stories of Rhaegar Targaryen over the past few weeks, he could not think of the man as anything more than his sire. Ned Stark would always be his father, for he was the one who had risked all to keep him safe. He was the man who had taught him honor and family, and the cost of duty. Jon lifted his eyes again and they softened as he met his Queen’s gaze once more. Knowing who he was helped simplify all the many things he felt. He was a Stark of Winterfell, and that would never change.

“You once told Theon,” Davos spoke from his left, “that he was a Greyjoy and a Stark, he did not have to choose.” The man nodded. “You may have been born of both Wolf and Dragon, but your heart is all Wolf, my Lord. You’re as Northern a man as I’ve ever met. It’s time the realm knew that too.”

There was a round of agreement and approval, and even Grey Worm had nodded at Jon with respect. Daenerys allowed a small smile to curve her lips before she turned her attention back to Tyrion. He was no longer her Hand, but he was still one of her closest advisors and as Master of Laws, she was leaning on his knowledge for many of the changes and proclamations they were making. “That takes care of Warden of the North. We are settled on Warden of the West… for now. We have discussed allowing the title of Warden of the East to remain with House Arryn, should Lord Robyn arrive and bend the knee.”

“We have had no response as yet,” Tyrion explained, “but it is difficult to get ravens to and from the Vale in winter. We have dispatched riders to carry missives from the Queen and her Council to both the Vale and Winterfell, with the understanding that it may be some weeks before we have responses.”

“As it so happens,” Jon stated, “the riders did encounter a party at the Crossroads, sent south from Winterfell. The raven arrived yesterday bearing the news that Bran, Samwell, and Gilly would be arriving with their host within the fortnight.” His gaze swept the rest of the table. “The scroll was written in Sam’s hand, I know it well. He wrote that Sansa with them until just south of The Neck, but then she and Lord Gendry, with a small group of guards led by Ser Brienne left them to ride ahead.”
Tyrion suppressed the urge to smirk when his brother appeared to jolt and sit straighter in his chair. “They would have been days ahead of Lord Bran and his party, although our riders did not encounter them on the Kingsroad.”

“She wouldn’t have come that way,” Jaime and Lord Selwyn spoke as one. The two men shared a look before the elder Lord tipped his head and allowed the Warden of the West to continue. “Brienne would anticipate that the Kingsroad is not safe for Sansa between the Crossroads and King’s Landing. She would have taken them out of the way to Saltspans and crossed to Maidenpool. It might have added a day, perhaps two to their journey, but Brienne will bring them south via Duskendale and Rosby.” It was exactly the route he had taken, and much safer for one who did not want to be recognized on the road. It was also easier to gain access to the Red Keep when entering the city via the Iron Gate.

Daenerys considered how long it would have taken the raven to reach them from the Crossroads, and though she did not know the layout of the land well, she had flown over the area they spoke of, between Maidenpool and Rosby, while traveling from Dragonstone atop Drogon. “Torgo Nudho,” she said to her Master of War, “if Lady Sansa and her party have not arrived in two days, dispatch our most trusted men to ride out and meet them. I would have the Wardeness of the North and my cousin arrive safely to my side.”

“Cousins,” Lord Selwyn corrected. “Lord Gendry travels with them, and if he is Robert Baratheon’s bastard, then he is a cousin to House Targaryen as well.”

“Aye,” Davos smirked. “And if you thought the look on the lad’s face was something when you made him Lord of Storm’s End,” he chuckled quietly, “wait until he learns that bit of news, for I’ve not told him. In the span of just a few years he’s gone from a bastard of Flea Bottom to the Lord of a Great House, and now a cousin to the Dragon Queen. The lad is in for a bit of a shock.”

Daenerys blinked a few times. She looked at Jon who only shrugged at her. Her family was suddenly growing by leaps and bounds, but she too had forgotten that the Baratheon line had been a cousin to her House. “Lord Gendry has been brave and true, I would be honored to name him cousin,” she decided, although she did not know how she felt about all of these changes. It was a comfort, of a sort, to not be such a foreigner in this land now that she had familial ties, but she had been alone for so long that the feeling had become a part of her.

“I believe that brings us to the matter of the Stormlands,” Tyrion told them. “Storm’s End has long been the seat of power in that region, the Baratheons were Lord Paramounts of the Stormlands for many generations, and while Lord Gendry has fought brave and true on behalf of the realm, and is a cousin to our Queen, he is a new Lord. While I do not doubt his ability to work hard…”

“They won’t accept him,” Davos agreed. “Stormlanders are a proud, stubborn lot, myself included,” he added, while a sheepish grin lit his face. “I’m fond of the lad, I’ll not deny it, and he will work hard and serve well, but he’s not ready. The Kingdoms need stability, as we’ve said many times, but a bastard born and raised in the slums of Flea Bottom, no matter how brave, or true, or honorable won’t bring the stability we need.”

“I would agree,” Daenerys nodded. “Lord Gendry will be loyal to the throne, and he has earned the reward of Storm’s End. It was Gendry that ran back to East Watch to send for me, alone, in the snow and the ice, and our mission north of the wall – foolish though it was in the end, would have been lost had he not. No one could have asked more of him than he had already given at that point, but when it came time to arm our people against the dead, he worked around the clock with the other smiths at Winterfell. Then he fought with our armies, and lived to tell of it. He is a Hero of Winterfell, and the Stormlands will know this, but he will have much to learn.” She looked at each of
her advisors in turn and found them all in agreement with her. “That is why,” she continued, “I would propose that we make Evenfall the ruling seat of the Stormlands henceforth.”

“Your Grace?” While the others seemed to have suspected the decision, Lord Selwyn was genuinely surprised. “Tarth is not part of the mainland.”

“No,” she agreed, “but it is part of the Stormlands, and by your own words the Island of Tarth has long been the protector of those shores. When your Lord called his bannermen, you answered that call. When the realm needed you to help free its people from the tyrant rule of the usurper queen, you answered that call. You have provided this Council with wisdom and knowledge, and I would reward that loyalty. The heir to your House is a Hero of Winterfell, and the first woman to be named Knight of the Seven Kingdoms. I can truly think of no better House with which to entrust the rule and protection of that region.” Her brow arched. “Ser Davos, what say you?”

“Aye,” he nodded. “The Stormlands will accept Lord Selwyn and House Tarth, easily, I think. There may be a few hold outs.” He slanted a look at the man who was to become his new liege Lord, “but if things go as I expect, they’ll fall in line with the rest.”

“What does the rest of my council think?” As each of them gave their approval in turn, a small smile graced the Queen’s lips. “Then let it be done,” she said. “I name you, Lord Selwyn of Tarth, Lord Paramount of the Stormlands.”

“I am honored to accept, Your Grace,” he nodded once. The swell of pride he felt was shining in his violet eyes. “I hope my House can continue to serve you well.”

Her attention shifted to Jon and he sat forward in his chair. “While there is no formal seat on the Small Council for such a position, and you would not have a vote in formal matters, the Queen and I will continue to welcome your counsel, as well as those others who will be named Lord Paramounts of the Kingdoms.”

“To include Lady Yara Greyjoy of the Iron Islands and Lord Edmure Tully of the Riverlands,” Tyrion stated. “That leaves us only missing a Warden of the South and Lord Paramount of the Reach.”

“Queen Daenerys and I have discussed the matter brought forth by Lord Jaime,” Jon said, “and we agree that the position will be held for Lord Willas of House Tyrell. The Small Council will sit in review of any claims or requests for judgment brought forth by Lord Willas against House Lannister.”

“The Law is a bit… murky on this matter,” Tyrion agreed. “While Lady Baratheon did hold the Iron Throne at the time the Royal Army and the Lords of the Reach marched against House Tyrell, there had been no formal coronation or anointing in the light of the Seven. House Lannister and those Houses of the Reach that marched on behalf of Queen Cersei can argue that House Tyrell was in open rebellion, but…”

“We have since changed allegiances and sworn fealty to House Targaryen,” Jaime finished for him. “I do not deny the crimes committed against House Tyrell by my own House. I have submitted to the Master of Laws the concessions that House Lannister is willing to make for the sake of peace.”

“The Lord Protector and I have reviewed those concessions,” Daenerys stated. She lifted her chin and fixed him with a hard look. “I valued Lady Olenna as both an advisor and an ally, but I did offer the judgment of restitution for House Lannister before the Battle of King’s Landing, and I was aware of those crimes at that time. I will not rescind that judgment now. The Seven Kingdoms have been at war too long. House alliances have been broken and reformed only to be broken again. House Tyrell
has been wronged, and Lord Willas will have back what is his, however…” The Queen folded her hands against the table in front of her and leaned forward. “I do not forget, Lord Jaime, that you rode north, one man, with one hand, to face those with every right to claim your head for crimes that you and your House had committed against them. You did so for the sake of a promise, because the realms of men needed every fighter willing to stand in the face of darkness and fought bravely against the army of the dead. Nor have I forgotten that when that fighting was done, you stayed to help rebuild Winterfell until honor compelled you to ride south again. When many of us seated here would have expected you to return to your sister’s side, you brought your knowledge and your armies once more to the aid of the realm.”

Daenerys’s eyes glinted like steel and he stared stone-faced back at her. “I do not believe that you and I will ever trust each other,” she continued, “for our history is very long and complicated, and I am certain we will never like each other, because while I can appreciate your honesty, it often tends toward insolence. That said,” she looked down for a moment and allowed a soft sigh to escape her lips. Daenerys looked up again and her eyes had softened by a small degree when she met his gaze again. “I can respect a man who is willing to do what is right, even when it is not what is easy or expected. Your wrongs are not forgotten, and there are many who will never forgive them, but I will have peace between the Reach and the Westerlands. I agree with the concessions put forth by Lord Jaime of House Lannister.”

His head bowed. “Your Grace.” Jaime saw no reason to acknowledge the truth in her words. They would never like nor trust one another, but if they could both keep their tempers he saw no reason they could not continue as they were. It was some relief, however, to know that even with the complication of House Tyrell on the horizon, the strides he was attempting to make on behalf of his House and the Westerlands would not be completely undone.

“If there is no other business,” Jon stated, and gave pause to allow any of the Lords at the table to put forth another item. When they did not, he nodded to Tyrion.

“Then we sit adjourned,” the Master of Laws stated. “We will reconvene in a sennight to review—“ Tyrion was interrupted when the door to the Small Council chamber was opened.

The Queen turned. “Yes, Jhaggo?” She had yet to name a formal Queensguard, and in that absence, her Blood Riders and Unsullied had been acting as her guards.

“Jin virzeth ver akka haj chiori zhorre jadat.” He told her, speaking quickly in his own tongue.

“Thank you.” Her attention turned back to the others as she rose. “It would seem, my Lords, that our concern was for naught. Lady Sansa and her party have arrived. Lord Stark, will you join me in greeting our Wardeness of the North?”

“My Queen.” He offered her his arm with a smile. He felt some relief knowing that Sansa had made it to the city, though there was still a conversation to come, and he was certain that it would end in argument. “I am certain that Lord Selwyn would like to join us as well,” he told her.

“Of course…” Her jaw clenched against the amusement bubbling within her. She could tell that her former Hand and new Master of Laws was trying, with much difficulty, not to roll his eyes at his brother. “Naturally, I would welcome anyone who wishes to greet our guests join us in doing so,” she finally said. Somehow it did not surprise her when the Lord of House Lannister stood and walked out of the room ahead of them. Daenerys shook her head. “I am going to end up having to call that man family,” she muttered. It was another reason to be wary of all this new family she found herself with. They had worried that she was mad, and obviously it was her cousin that was afflicted with the disease, she thought.
“That is my fear as well,” Selwyn sighed. “Though I suppose I should feel… heartened at his eagerness. Not that he has asked.”

“He won’t,” Tyrion shook his head. “Not until he has spoken to her, even if the idea has occurred to him, and I know that it has for there are those among us who have been making certain that it does not slip his mind. If it helps,” he told his Queen, “you shall be related to me as well.”

Daenerys smiled fondly at him. “Would that my cousin had chosen the better brother,” she lamented.

“I’m certain that would make many of you feel better,” Tyrion agreed, “however, I should also point out that it would make the mummers’ farce that was my wedding to Lady Sansa look quite regal and elegant by comparison.”

“Oh stop it,” she admonished. Though there had been failures, he was still one of her most trusted advisors, and one of the few friends she had left.

“No, I’m serious. Imagine it if you would. Me standing next to Lady Sansa, who was already quite tall at only four and ten, a cloak in my hands and no stool.” Tyrion walked behind his Queen and the Lord Protector as they made their way from the Council Chambers to the throne room.

They would greet their guests on the steps of the Keep, as was appropriate, but it would take them some minutes to get there. As they walked, Tyrion told them the story of his terrible wedding day as seen through the lens of a man who could look back upon it with some amusement.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to Gayeld for reminding me about Gendry. I found a place to work that in. ;-)

So Brienne knew Jaime couldn't behave, and he's not. He's antagonizing she who still has one fully grown dragon. Also, yes he did just run out of a room in front of his queen to beat her to the door because... he is completely pathetic, gods love him.
Reunions

Chapter Notes

I did not think I would get this edited today, but I did, so I am posting it now. I have also updated the tags on this fic to point out that it is not Dany-centric. I do adore her, and wanted a better end for her too, but my apologies to all for the confusion. Thanks!

In the shadow of the Great Hall, which also served as the throne room, and the thick walls of Maegor’s Holdfast, was the raised courtyard of the middle bailey in which royal guests were greeted. When the Queen and her retinue arrived they found Lord Jaime already waiting. He seemed to have gained Ser Addam and Ser Daven along the way, and the two men looked on with some amusement while their Lord fidgeted impatiently.

It seemed the guards at the gate had only been waiting for the arrival of their Queen, for they heard the creak of the bolts being raised and then the doors swung slowly outward at her appearance in the courtyard. The onlookers watched as the banner of House Stark appeared, carried by one of the forward guards. He led the procession into the bailey, followed by Podrick who was checking the walls surrounding the courtyard and allowing his gaze to sweep over all present as he rode forward.

Jaime and Tyrion exchanged a look at the sight of the direwolf sigil glinting upon his chest in the afternoon sunlight. The younger of the two brothers tilted his head in askance, but Jaime only shrugged, of this he had no knowledge. Arya appeared at their side a moment later, just as Gendry came into view, and she seemed to vibrate with energy at his arrival, though she was attempting to look as neutral and uncaring as she usually did.

Tyrion looked up at his brother at the same moment the very obvious object of his brother’s affections and attention rode into the courtyard. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“I’m always an idiot,” he grumbled back, but his eyes never left her. Her pale hair seemed to glow in the sunlight. She sat tall and proud, and it seemed that all of them had exchanged the heavy furs they had worn at Winterfell for lighter, fur lined cloaks that would be more appropriate in the less severe temperatures that still surrounded the Crownlands. She had forgone her armor for this greeting, he realized, and it was all he could do to remain rooted to where he stood. Her cloak was grey and matched the grey of her woolskin breeches, but the leather jerkin she wore was black and well-fitted, and it hugged the sturdy, long lines of her body entirely too well, to his way of thinking. Jaime would not complain, however. She wore no other adornments but the sword at her side, and the gold and rubies of the lion’s head pommel seemed to catch fire in the sunlight.

There was nothing at all about her form that most people would call feminine, but Jaime had spent a number of hours over the course of several weeks learning every inch of her and he knew her body almost as well as his own. He knew and could see every curve of her, and the ache of having missed her for so long burned through him. The need to have her in his grasp was a physical ache, and one he did not think he would be rid of anytime soon.

Their eyes met before her horse had taken even a few steps through the courtyard and he read relief in their depths before they seemed to darken and echo the longing and loneliness that he had been feeling in the many long weeks since he left Winterfell. He saw a flash of red in the corner of his vision and recognized, somewhere in the back of his mind, that Lady Sansa rode beside her, but
Jaime paid no heed the Lady of Winterfell. His gaze was for her knight, and her knight alone.

Whatever amusement any of them might have felt at the elder Lannister brother’s expense was pushed aside as the party came to a stop and began dismounting. Lady Sansa walked forward, wearing a gown of deep, winter grey with a black cloak adorning her shoulders. She stopped in front of the gathered crowd, the Queen and Jon standing at its center, and dropped into a deep, perfectly executed curtsey.

“Your Grace,” Sansa’s voice rang clear and unwavering in the open, afternoon air, “House Stark was gladdened to hear of your success in reclaiming the Iron Throne.”

Daenerys very much doubted that, but she did not doubt that the other woman was happy that her brother and their armies had prevailed with so little life lost. “Lady Stark,” she greeted her and hoped the cheer in her tone did not ring false. She wanted there to be peace between them, not only for the Kingdoms but for Jon’s sake too. “We are pleased to welcome you to King’s Landing. Please rise, you will be our honored guests and friends.”

“We had a raven from Sam,” Jon told them. “He sent it from the Crossroads. We’ve been waiting for you.” He met his sister’s gaze, and though he was angry with her, it did not stop the relief or fondness he felt. “He told us that they had all arrived safely at the inn. We expect them to reach the city within the fortnight.”

“There are chambers waiting for you,” Daenerys told them. “You have only to tell the Steward of your needs, and they will be met.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Sansa would not say she felt any relief at having arrived, but it would be good to be off the road for a while. “While the memories are not pleasant, these walls are familiar. I am certain that my people and I will find our way.”

“Lady Stark,” Tyrion took a step forward. “I took the liberty of having the apartments you resided in during our marriage made ready for you. I seemed to recall that you quite appreciated the view.” They were also rooms furthest from the Royal apartments, and she had once found sanctuary there. He thought she might appreciate that familiarity with her return.

“That is most appreciated, my Lord,” Sansa nodded to him. “I know the way to those rooms quite well, and you are correct, I found much pleasing about the view.” She had sought solace staring at the bay from their windows. It had been a place for her to go, to escape Joffrey and Cersei, and the scheming and lying of courtly life.

“I am gladdened by this news,” Daenerys told her, and was able to offer a more genuine smile. “Ser Brienne,” her attention shifted to the tall, stalwart protector behind Lady Stark’s left shoulder. “We did not have much opportunity to speak at Winterfell, but it pleases me to welcome you here, and to offer you our gratitude for the timely arrival of your Lord Father and his army,” her brows lifted before she added, “cousin.”

Brienne had glanced only briefly at her father, she thought if she looked any longer she would be lost and fling herself into his strong, all encompassing embrace. She looked toward him with the Queen’s words and clasped her hands more tightly in front of her as she felt the urge to do just that more strongly than ever before. Long years had separated them, and she was no longer the girl who had left the shores of her home to answer a call to arms, driven more by her own infatuation and a need to prove herself than the honor she had come to wear as a second skin. “I am thankful that my raven reached him in time, Your Grace,” she forced her gaze away and bowed her head in deference to the woman before her, one whose eyes were the same startling shade of violet as the man who had held
her, soothed her, and taught her to wield a sword.

It was all taking much too long as far as Arya was concerned. She and Gendry had been staring at each other, when he would look at her at all, seeming wary at her presence; she was reminded that she had turned down his marriage proposal. She supposed she couldn’t expect that he would be thrilled to see her, but she would remind him that he’d had quite a lot to drink before he made the offer. She would also remind him that she had never wanted to be a Lady, and that night was not the first time she had told him so. In the meantime, she leaned around Jaime and Tyrion to scowl at her brother.

Daenerys felt Jon stiffen beside her and thought she knew the source of his frustration. The corners of her mouth twitched with amusement. “We will all talk more later, I am certain. For now, I know you are all tired from your travels.” She laid her hand on Jon’s arm again and turned to him.

“We will see you all settled,” Jon announced, wanting to prevent an Arya shaped argument from breaking out at all the courtly grace and heraldry they were being forced to observe, and thankful that Daenerys could read him so well, better than she had even before they known they were related, or so he believed. He waved a hand in the direction of a few of his own guards and knew they would see to the horses and their guests’ things. He turned to Dany and bowed his head. “My Queen,” he said softly.

“Take care of your sister,” she told him, and offered his arm a squeeze. Daenerys withdrew from the group, and with her own men flanking her, made her way back inside the Keep.

He waited until she was gone before he turned back to Sansa. A small smile played at his lips as he held out his arms. “It is good to see you, sister.”

She moved quickly into them. Sansa closed her eyes as he held her, just as tightly as he had that day at Castle Black. “Forgive me,” she whispered against his ear. “I was afraid.” It had only been the two of them for a time, and though it had not seemed very long, they had faced the North and the Boltons together, and won back their home.

Whatever anger he still felt melted away. Jon nodded as he set her away from him. “I understand,” he said thickly, “but we will talk of it. There are many things we need to talk about.” Things he could not even discuss with Arya. Only Jaime knew his thoughts, and Jon thought the man’s opinions might be skewed by his own history. He would have Sansa’s thoughts on the matter. She was the one he trusted most, even after knowing she had revealed his secret to Tyrion. “But first…” He took a half step back and grunted when a solid form collided with the pair of them.

While the Stark siblings were clinging to one another, Brienne finally moved toward the only man who could make her feel small. She swallowed back whatever anxiety she felt at finally being reunited with him, for she knew he must have heard many things about her over the years, and presented herself in front of him. “Father,” his name was an exhalation of relief and longing, and many years of homesickness.

He studied her, from the very roots of her hair to the tips of her boots. She bore new scars, some he could see and others he knew were not visible. She could never hide from him, his girl, though she had often tried. This woman, however, was not the girl he had sent to Lord Renly’s camp. No longer did she stand hunched, as though trying to deny the truth of her height. She stood tall and proud before him, her hair longer than it was the last time he saw it, but still swept back from her face, though it now curled around her ears. He reached out and tapped the pommel of the sword she wore at her side. “Well, that explains quite a lot, I think.”

There was humor, entirely too much of it, dancing in his violet gaze. Brienne closed her eyes as she
felt heat rising up her neck to her face. She knew Jaime must have said something, or done something, because he was Jaime and he simply could not help himself. “It was a gift,” was all she said, as the actual story of it was much longer than she was prepared to tell at the moment.

The blush gracing her cheeks was only too familiar and Selwyn realized his girl was still in there after all, hidden behind the form of the proud warrior before him. “It is a smart man that gifts a good blade to a deserving knight,” he told her. He touched her chin with just the tips of his fingers and when her eyes opened, he saw in them a thousand different tales. He saw regret and sorrow, but joy and pride, and a myriad of other emotions the years had wrought. He drew her forward and folded his arms around her. “It has been too long, my girl.”

“I have missed you,” she whispered, and let her eyes close again as she sank gladly into the familiar embrace. Here was warmth, and home, and peace. She had missed that familiar sense of security.

A few yards away, Sansa continued to hold her sister tightly. “I’m so glad you’re okay, Arya. I was so worried.” She had feared, truly, they would all be separated again. That the Gods would be so cruel as to pull them apart when they had finally found their way back, and if the Stranger did not come for them, it would be long years before she saw them again. She could not bear it, that cold chill of fear and loneliness that threatened to freeze her very heart.

“I killed the Night King,” Arya reminded her, if a bit haughtily, “Cersei Lannister was never going to beat me.” She pulled away from Sansa and lifted her chin, pride and defiance dancing in her gaze. “I did it, Sansa. I looked her right in the eye, and though she still lives, I told her who I was before I took everything away from her. I did it for you, and Father, and all of us. She will never hurt you again, not ever.”

Jon had felt Sansa tense at the mention of Cersei’s continued good health and laid a hand against her shoulder. “She’s at Dragonstone,” he explained quietly. “She is well guarded and will remain that way until her babe is born and she is well enough to stand trial for all the crimes that she has committed.”

“Babe?” Sansa’s eyes widened in surprise, she shot an accusing look in Jaime’s direction before they moved immediately to Brienne, who was having her own reunion with her father. “Did you know?” Her tone was more concerned than distrustful, but part of her wondered why, if her sworn shield had known, Brienne had not told her.

She stepped away from her father to meet her Lady’s gaze. “I did, my Lady, but it was not my news to share,” she explained. “It was told to me in confidence, though I was aware at the time that Lord Tyrion also knew of it. If it was necessary to the plans being made to march against King’s Landing, I am certain that it would have been revealed during any of the strategy meetings held at Winterfell.”

“I see,” Sansa calmed with her explanation. “I understand, Ser Brienne, and it is not that I felt I should have known, but that I believe you should have,” she said, rather pointedly.

“Yes, my Lady,” Brienne nodded. “I agree entirely.” The two women shared a look, each of them understanding the feelings and motivations of the other.

Although it was barely audible, and very nearly carried away on the cool, winter’s breeze, they heard a quietly muttered, “I’m not that big of an idiot.”

“Yes you are,” Tyrion told his brother, and because he simply could not stand to bear witness to even another moment of his brother’s pathetic pining, he walked forward to greet the young man who moved toward them now that he had seen to the horses and the rest of their guard. “Podrick
Payne, we meet again my young friend. Who is this with you?” He nodded to the girl beside him.

“Lord Tyrion.” The younger man smiled widely. “It is Ser Podrick now,” he told him, and his chest puffed out with pride at the new title.

“A most well deserved accomplishment,” Tyrion said, and meant it truly. “Of Winterfell, it would seem,” he nodded to the sigil worn on the man’s chest.

“Yes,” Podrick nodded. “I am sworn to Lady Sansa and House Stark,” he explained. “And this,” he gestured to the girl beside him, “is Lady Jorelle of House Mormont. She is the Heir to Bear Island and squire to Ser Brienne. Lord Tyrion Lannister,” he told her, “Hand to the Queen.”

“Master of Laws now,” Tyrion corrected. “We’ve made a few changes to the way things will be done,” he shrugged. “There will no longer be a Hand to the Queen, or King, to help rule the Seven Kingdoms. One of many things,” he said, “that will be explained over the coming days. It is, however, a pleasure to meet you Lady Jorelle.”

Though she wore breeches and leather, as her Lady-Ser did, Jory executed a perfect curtsey. “The pleasure is mine, my Lord.”

“Go with Loren and Matthor,” Podrick told her quietly. “Find out where Ser Brienne’s chambers are, and make sure that her things are brought there. Then have a bath and food ordered. She is cousin to the Queen,” he said in a soft voice, not wanting to embarrass the newly minted squire, “so her chambers will be big enough for her immediate household, which will include you.” Normally that extra space would be for a handmaiden and not a squire, but Jory was a girl and would not join him or the rest of their guards in the barracks as any other squire or page would, adjustments would be made for the sake of propriety and her own safety.

Jory nodded, appreciating the direction. Gratitude shone brightly in her brown eyes. “Thank you, Ser Podrick.”

Tyrion watched her hurry away, eager to do her duty for her Knight. “You’ve come a long way, Podrick.”

“Seems a lifetime ago,” he admitted, “since we were both last here, like this.

“It was, my friend,” Tyrion nodded, “another lifetime entirely. Come, let us go and have a drink. If we stand here any longer my brother is going to embarrass us both with his tears and pleading. Ser Daven, my favorite cousin,” he gestured to the man as he and Podrick walked toward him, “you should join us. Ser Addam, who was my brother’s better half when they were boys, you should meet Ser Podrick. He squired for me once upon a time. Come, let us all drink and be merry, and I will tell you all about the time I walked into a crypt with two fully grown dragons…”

“I thought you said they were half-grown dragons?” Podrick asked as he followed along behind him.

“I’m quite certain I didn’t,” Tyrion sniffed. “They were great snarling beasts, just the same. Besides, this is my story Ser Podrick. You should let me tell it.”

“Aye, and the next time he tells it,” Daven remarked, “there will have been four fully grown dragons in the crypt.”

“Probably.” Podrick smirked. “Is this going to be like the honeycomb and the jackass story?”

“Gods, I hope not,” Addam muttered.
Jaime watched them go and felt relief wash over him. He didn’t know which was worse, standing there, waiting for his chance to greet Brienne after all the time they had spent apart, while his mind tried to conjure up all the reasons for which she might not want to see him, or being forced to do all of that while his brother and two of his closest friends, who also happened to be his bannermen, watched the entire ordeal. It was different this time, or so he kept reminding himself every time every time the voice in the back of his mind whispered that they had been parted before. That voice sounded treacherously like Cersei and he would not listen to it. All the times they had said goodbye before, they had never parted with the feel of her hands on his skin or the taste of her still on his lips. He had not known the feel, or warmth, or sound of her as they had lain together, and though he had missed her every time, and thought of her often, he had not ached for her as he had this time.

In all truth, it was terribly cruel that he should stand there so long, while his lessers smirked and grinned, and thought they knew the inner workings of his mind and heart. He told himself to be patient, and each time he wanted to shift or fidget, Jaime reminded himself that he was a Lannister of Casterly Rock and the lion did not prance about like a foolish, lovesick boy. He was worse than a squire at his first tourney, but at least he knew it. He tried to appear as nonchalant as the Lord of Casterly Rock should and looked down his nose at the Starks, who continued to stand between him and his lady, and swore to himself that if Arya Stark smirked at him, even once more, he was going to pick her up and toss her like the annoying little shit she could be, no matter how fond of her he had grown in recent weeks. His eyes narrowed when he met her mocking look. How far could wolves fly, he wondered.

Her head tilted while her grey eyes gleamed. He was plotting, his brow always wrinkled when he was plotting. It was a tell that Arya had figured out very early on, even before any of them had left Winterfell to deal with Cersei. She had an idea what he was plotting, he had threatened it enough, but his words were as empty as his proclamations that she liked him. Arya folded her arms behind her back and walked toward him. “Are you a lion or a hare,” she said quietly, voice barely above a whisper and for his ears only, “because you’re hopping around like a hare.”

“I am no—” He did not get the rest of his response out because her hand closed around his right wrist in a vice grip. The little wolf was stronger than she looked, that was certain, and he grimaced as her fingers dug into his skin above where his golden hand was attached to his stump. “Arya,” he hissed as she drug him toward her brother and sister.

“You’re going to thank me,” she told him. Arya drug him toward where Brienne stood, quietly speaking to her father. “Lord Selwyn,” she let go of Jaime before drawing their attention. “I do not believe that you have met Lord Gendry of Storm’s End.” She looked to where he and Ser Davos stood, talking quietly while they waited, ostensibly for the opportunity to make the introduction that she was paving the way for. “I have known Gendry since I was a girl,” she spoke with as much formality as she could recall learning from her mother and Septa Mordane, “it would please me, my Lord, to make that introduction.”

Selwyn looked between his daughter and Lord Jaime, who now appeared to be aware of only each other. It was much like the gaze they had shared when she had first ridden into the courtyard. He had not expected to hold her attention this long, and did not think he would get it back. He had known she felt some affection for the man before them, and he was certain the Lion felt something in return, for Selwyn had to admit that he had been pining as fiercely as a man could. What he had not realized was just how deeply that truly went, for the both of them. It was quite awkward for a father to witness, though he had often despaired that no one would care for his dear girl half as well as he did. How mistaken he had been, it seemed.

In the time he had spent at Court, and certainly around Lady Arya, he had never heard such courtly grace pass her lips. The corners of Selwyn’s mouth twitched toward a smile. He met her gaze and
saw a good deal of amusement dancing in their grey depths. Selwyn bowed to her before offering his arm. “Lady Arya, it would be an honor to join you in welcoming your friend.”

She took his arm, and as they turned, she winked at Jaime. It did not mean she liked him, though. It was Brienne that she was helping, and she would remind him of that later, before his head swelled with any lofty ideas. “Lord Gendry was an apprentice of Master Mott,” she said as they walked away, “but I believe his work is far better. He is the only Smith I know who has ever created weapons using dragon glass…”

The rest of the courtyard seemed to fade away once they were left to themselves, or as much to themselves as they could be with others still mingling about. Brienne let her eyes quickly sweep his form. He looked good, she thought, although not altogether well rested. He had not been sleeping; she could see that in the deeper lines around his eyes. They had both struggled with nightmares following the Battle for Winterfell, and she imagined that would be worse now, with his return to King’s Landing. She imagined that many of his memories were plaguing his sleep, but that was a conversation to have later. He had trimmed his hair and beard, so that he looked better groomed than the last time she saw him, but he had not shaved and the tips of her fingers itched to stroke his whisker-covered cheek. Instead, she clasped her hands in front of her, to stop herself from reaching for him while a line formed between her brows. “What was that?” She asked.

Jaime lifted his shoulder in response. He was not sure that he could speak past the sudden tightness in his throat, but somehow he managed to form the first words he had spoken to her in some weeks. “Nothing, truly. She likes me.”

Brienne gave him a mildly incredulous look that bordered on amusement. “I really do not think that is true.” She could not imagine that he thought so either, but he shrugged at her again and took a step forward. She drew a quick breath when the fingers of his left hand touched hers, in only the faintest of caresses.

“It’s true,” he told her. His eyes were fixed upon hers as he relearned all the differing shades they could change in the space of only a few moments. His fingers tingled as warmth radiated upward from his left hand. “Well, it’s a work in progress,” he admitted, “but she’s not trying to kill me. We’ve been exchanging stories.” He leaned even closer and almost closed his eyes at the scent of her, leather and soap, and that tiny hint of lemons that always lingered, thanks to Sansa. Or maybe he was imagining that, because he didn’t think Lady Sansa would have brought lemon oil all the way from Winterfell, not as he imagined they had been traveling.

“Jaime,” his name was a whisper on her lips. He was close enough now that she could feel the heat of him. The back of one finger was stroking the very length of her hand, and it was ridiculous that so simple a touch could make her heart flutter, but she could not fathom the idea of pulling away from that sweet torment. “Stories? Really? Is that what you have been doing all this time?”

“No.” He pitched his voice low, so that it rumbled between the two of them. “I have been trying to survive without you.”

She lowered her gaze, because she knew if she did not she was going to kiss him. They would embarrass themselves there, in front of her father, her Lady, and several others. “Jaime,” she whispered his name again and exhaled a shuddering breath.

“It has been a long journey, Ser Brienne,” he took a step back from her. “May I escort you inside? Between the two of us, we should be able to determine where your squire has run off to.”

“I would appreciate the assistance, Ser Jaime.” Whether he meant Lady Jorelle or Podrick, she could not say, and did not care. There was nothing else on her mind but the thought of escaping so many
prying eyes. Her Lady would be well attended with her brother, and so Brienne went with Jaime as he led her inside the Keep.

-TBC-
A Warrior made flesh

Chapter Notes

Not too graphic, but I thought I would warn this chapter is NSFW.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They walked in silence for several minutes. There was much to say, but where to begin? Did he start with the night that he left Winterfell? Or talk about all of the doubts he had while traveling south? Should he tell her of the dreams with Bran, or even the dream he had of her, or should he tell her of everything that happened since? Or maybe it wasn’t facts and actions that he should talk of. Perhaps he should tell her of all the long hours of longing, and how very hard it was to breathe each day that he was without her.

Jaime wondered if he should tell her how very much it hurt to do what he knew to be the right thing, how he felt a part of him had been carved from the very center of his being when he made the choice to betray Cersei for the sake of the Seven Kingdoms. Or should he confess that it was not all the millions of lives in Westeros that he had done it for, as that was just too much a burden for anyone to carry and certainly too much for one such as him. Should he admit that when he closed his eyes he was saving only a few, that it was for her, and his brother, and the babe Cersei carried. That it was for her Stark Ladies, and his Prince, and even her father. Would she still think him a good man, a man of honor if she knew that he cared so little for the rest of the realm?

Would she still love him if she knew how very weak he truly was?

Brienne glanced at him from the corner of her eye. He was silent as they walked. He was never silent. The man literally had no ability to keep his mouth closed for more than a moment at a time, and that he was doing it now was worrisome. She drew her teeth across her bottom lip and wondered what it was that might be troubling him to this degree. He did seem happy to see her, although he was usually glad to see her after a separation, but it had been different this time. They were different.

Or were they? His words outside seemed to indicate as much, but now that they were alone and walking to… well, Brienne didn’t entirely know where they were going. She had not stayed in King’s Landing long enough to be very familiar with the Red Keep, and when she had been a guest before her chambers had been in the Maidenvault. That was not where they were going now, Brienne could recall that much about her last time there.

As they walked, down one corridor, and up a flight of stairs, and then down another corridor, seeming to go in circles and following no path that made any sense at all, she noticed that he was tapping his fingers against his left thigh. He did that when he was nervous. What had he to be nervous about, though, was the question she could not answer.

She thought for a moment of their shared dream, and wondered if she should speak of it. Would he recall? Did he know that it was not just the imaginings of his mind? Would he be able to accept that they seemed to be so inexplicably connected? They lived in a world where dragons once again filled the sky with the dark shadow of their wings, where the dead walked, and a boy barely old enough to be a man could see all that was, all that is, and all that was happening at any given moment. Surely the magic of dreams would pale in comparison to those things.
It was a world where one such as him could love one such as her, and surely that was a magic all its own.

They topped another flight of stairs and turned to make their way down another corridor that she could not distinguish from any of the others they had already walked. A frown drew her brows together and she sighed. She stopped walking and turned to him. “Jaime.”

“Brienne.” He spoke at the same moment she did. The expression on her face was so perplexed that he could do nothing but smile at her. Jaime shook his head and took a step toward her. They were alone in the corridor, and there was no one to see him as he laid his hand against her waist. “I have missed you.” It seemed too simple a statement to explain all that he had felt without her at his side, but it was all that he could say to explain himself.

She laid her hand against his shoulder and leaned toward him. “As I have you,” she answered. His absence had been a painful void in her life, an emptiness she had not felt before, and it seemed to only grow larger with every day they were apart. Her hand slipped to the crook of his neck and she let her thumb stroke the underside of his jaw. The whiskers of his beard tickled her skin.

He sucked in a breath at the feel of her fingers against his skin, warm and real, and not the shade of a dream or a memory. He reached for her hand and curled his fingers around it. It was only the space of a few inches to bring her palm to his lips, and he did so. He felt the tremble in her fingers and saw the darkening of her eyes. Her lips parted to draw a breath and he leaned forward, no thought on his mind but to get closer, to breathe her in, drink her in, and never let go of her again.

“Jaime.” His name was a low, shuddering sigh on her lips, hardly even a whisper. She felt the press of his golden hand against her side, heavy and cool, but drawing her forward.

His lips ghosted the line of her jaw, and the corner of her mouth. His nose brushed, nuzzled against her cheek, and then his mouth hovered, not quite touching hers as their breaths mingled. His eyes lifted to the half-lidded gaze above him, and in the dim corridor, her eyes looked almost slate with need. “Brienne.”

The sound of a door opening a few yards away had them springing apart. Breaths were quickly drawn and eyes blinked as they both attempted to clear the haze of desire from their vision. Brienne clamped her jaw tightly together and scowled at the two servants that appeared, both of them carrying empty pails in each hand as they made their way quickly down the corridor. “Perhaps it would be more prudent,” she managed to say, “to find my rooms.”

“A thoroughly excellent suggestion.” It was all he could do not to follow the two young lads and thrash them for the interruption. “We’ve actually arrived, as luck would have it.” He waved a hand toward the door from whence the boys had come and guided her toward it. “Welcome to the Royal Apartments. The Queen’s rooms are actually two floors up, and I believe your father is somewhere in this tower as well, as is Jon Snow…well, Stark now.” He waved off her questioning look. “I’ll explain later.” Talking about the inane location of where everyone was laying their heads was a decent enough distraction, and would give him the time he needed to recover himself, or else he might embarrass the poor young lady that was waiting for them.

The girl couldn’t have been more than four and ten, if she had gained that many years, and she was directing the attention of three other servants. Two of them were girls who had appeared from the bedchamber, carrying empty pails as the boys had done. The third was placing a tray laden with fruit, cheese, sweet breads and hard meats on a table near the wide, arched windows. She turned when they appeared and clasped her hands in front of her. “Ser Brienne.”

“Jory, it appears you’ve already been quite busy,” Brienne nodded approvingly.
“Aye,” the girl’s dark head bobbed. “Your things have been brought up. I had your saddlebags placed in the bedchamber. There is a bath waiting for you, and they’ve just brought your midday repast. There is wine,” she gestured to the flagon on the table, “but I had fresh water brought up as well, I know you prefer it.”

“Thank you.” She turned to Jaime beside her. “This is Lady Jorelle Mormont. She is Lady Lyanna’s older sister and heir to Bear Island.” His brows lifted at the idea of the elder sibling being the heir to the younger and she tilted her head at him. “Lady Jory was sent to foster at Castle Cerwyn upon her betrothal to young Lord Cerwyn several years ago.” Before her mother and eldest sisters had perished fighting wars that should never have been.

“I see.” He nodded his head in the girl’s direction. “Your sister, Lyanna, was a truly singular Lady,” he told her, “I do not believe I have ever met any fiercer, except our Ser Brienne. She fought well and bravely.”

“Aye, she did, Ser Jaime.” Jory had been in the crypts with the other women, but she knew where her sister had been, and knew the legend of her well enough. She did not need the likes of the Kingslayer to tell her that. Her attention moved directly back to her knight and her brows rose in respectful askance, though there was an imperious tilt to her chin. “Will you be needing anything else, Ser?”

“No until later. I expect my father will want me to sup with him.” Brienne straightened at the change in the girl’s attitude and drew herself to her full height. “Go on and get cleaned up,” she told her, “then find your own luncheon. When you’ve finished with that, you can check on Lady Sansa. I’m certain she’s well attended, but you will see to her needs, and then make sure all our gear was properly stored. Return to me an hour before supper.”

“Aye,” the girl nodded to them. “Sers.” Jory left them to conduct whatever their business was, though she chose not to fathom the actual details. There was not a soul in Winterfell that hadn’t known what those two were about, in the weeks following the Long Night. Her Lady-Ser was a brave and true Knight, to be sure, but the Kingslayer was an unfortunate choice of man for her affections, and Jory wouldn’t feel badly about thinking so.

Jaime followed the departing squire with his eyes. It was not until she had gone and the door closed behind her that he turned back to Brienne. She had moved from where she stood beside him, and he watched her for a moment as she loosened the belt of the scabbard strapped to her waist and placed Oathkeeper carefully against the wall. He watched the sunlight from the windows catch on the lion’s head hilt, saw how the gold and rubies sparkled and shined, much as she did. It was almost as though the sword itself was a reflection of her honor, of her goodness. He was glad that he had given it to her. He would never have been worthy of it, no matter the shape of the hilt. Back at Winterfell he wanted to believe the lions meant she was for him. That it was some way the Gods, or the fates, or whatever the fuck they were called were pulling them together. Now his confidence was failing him. If he was not worthy of the sword, was he worthy of her?

“I should never have touched you,” he said, almost blurring the words before he could stop them. “I shouldn’t have laid a single finger on you. I know that. You should know that, she,” he waved his hand in the direction the girl had gone, “certainly knows that. I don’t know what I was thinking, actually no, that isn’t true. I do know what I was thinking, the problem is I didn’t stop to consider the consequences.” He began to pace, unable to meet her gaze as all the doubts that had been plaguing him bubbled out of him, finding voice with a force that he could not have held back even with the strongest shield or force of magic. Everything he had feared or worried about had been confirmed in the single, disapproving look of her young squire. “I never stop to consider the consequences, which is exactly what is wrong with my life, and how I got here, how most of us got here to be honest.”
“Jaime, what…” She stared at him and worry filled her eyes. If he was silent before, his words now were coming almost on top of one another. It was difficult to make sense of all of it. “What are you talking about? What does Jory have to do with you and I, and for gods sake, would you stop pacing and look at me!” She reached out to grab his arm, but he shrugged her hand off. She could not track the rapid shift in his mood, though she had known him to be moody before. The demons of his mind were his own worst enemy.

“That look!” He tossed his hand in the direction of the door again. “The look that was on her face, surely you saw it? It’s the same way everyone looks at me. Not that I haven’t earned it, because believe me, I have. You can’t say you haven’t seen it. Your father looks at me that way, the Queen looks at me that way, even my own brother looks at me the way she just did. That expression, that disgust, as though I were something they had just wiped off the bottom of their boot. I have been seeing it for more than twenty years, and there isn’t anything that I can do to change it.” Even Cersei had looked at him that way when he returned to her from the Riverlands those years ago, no longer whole or golden, just himself and lesser compared to her. It should have been his first clue that everything had changed, but as usual he was too stupid to realize it. He truly was the stupidest Lannister.

Jaime stopped pacing and stared back at her. His chest was heaving, and truly each breath felt as though he were trying to pull air into his lungs through a very thick wall. “I am never going to be good enough for you, I am never going to deserve you. Everywhere we go, for the rest of our lives, people are going to look at me just like that and wonder what you could possibly be thinking. They’ll wonder whether you’re mad, or stupid, or if I did something to trick you, or force you to be with me. Probably not my Aunt Genna,” he added, “she’ll think you’re marvelous, although she will probably wonder why you’ve lowered yourself to the likes of me, but she is fond of me, or at least she was, it’s all rather murky at the moment. What matters is that I’ve done enough in my life to send me to the very deepest bowels of the seven hells, and you should know that, you should understand the loathing and the ridicule that is going to follow you because by the gods, I am not strong enough to give you up. I am not honorable enough to walk away from you. I am going to ask your father for your hand, because I can at least do that part right. We will ally the Westerlands to the Stormlands, you will be the Lady of Casterly Rock as well as the next Evenstar, and that may be enough to stay the tongues of most people, but it won’t stop them all. My father used to have a saying, he said that Lions do not concern themselves with the opinions of the sheep, but that isn’t true. I concern myself, especially when it’s about you, I—”

She finally laid her fingers against his mouth because it had become apparent that he wasn’t going to stop talking on his own. He was working himself into quite a fit, and it wasn’t needed, not really. “Jaime.” She spoke his name quietly, calmly, and when his gaze met hers, Brienne moved her hands so that his face was gently cupped between them. She could see the panic in his eyes, the way the gold flecks lit and the green seemed to burn around his dilated pupils. She could feel the uneasy tremble in him, the way his muscles flexed and relaxed, as though preparing to run or fight and being unsure which it should be. “Enough, stop, please.” Her lips turned up in a small smile. He was completely ridiculous, everything he said was as infuriating as it was endearing, but that was what she had always felt in his presence. He could anger her and frustrate her like no one else she had ever known before, but he usually managed to do that at the same time he was making her love him in ways she hadn’t thought possible. “Do you remember the first words you ever said to me? Not at me, not about me, the first words you said to me.” She searched his eyes and saw confusion first, and then recognition. It was followed by regret, and then the eyes she loved so much were filled with sorrow and pain. Her thumbs stroked his whisker-covered cheeks. “What did you say?” She asked again, more gently this time.

“You’re much uglier in daylight,” he whispered. He could remember every terrible word he had
spoken to her in those days. He recalled every insult, and each one had been intended to hurt. His words were the only weapons he’d had at his disposal during the time he had been a prisoner, and he had wielded them as he would a sword. It was yet more proof of just how much he did not deserve her.

“It was not the first time, Jaime.” She drew away from him, and walked a few steps before she looked at him again. “I have been hearing things like that my entire life. I heard them on Tarth, when I was little more than a girl. My own Septa made certain I knew my deficiencies and that I would find a husband who wanted to be heir to my father, but I should not concern myself with any compliments he might pay me. The looking glass would tell it true enough. I heard it in Renly’s camp, when I was trying to prove myself as a fighter. I heard it from you, and I heard it from the bloody Brave Companions. I heard it here, in King’s Landing, and everywhere that I went after that.”

“Brienne…” He tried to interrupt her, to tell her that it didn’t matter, that it wasn’t true. He hadn’t known her then. The others who said those things, they didn’t know her either. They looked, but they didn’t see, because if they had, even for a moment, her light would have blinded them, just as it had blinded him. It was that brilliant, the power of her, how good she was, how true. She was everything that he had ever aspired to be as a boy, and she was mocked for it, because of her sex and her looks, and because people were stupid and petty. They didn’t know her strength, and they didn’t know her warmth. They had not felt the gentle touch of her hands, cool against a feverish brow, or had her arms wrapped around them, when they were weak and pained. They had not seen her eyes shining with care or trust, or understanding. They didn’t see her beauty because they were looking for reflections of themselves, and in doing so they would always find something ugly staring back at them.

She shook her head, not ready yet to let him speak. He had said his piece, quite dismally actually, though she knew what he was trying to tell her, and why. Now he would listen, and when she was finished, he would know. Brienne trailed a hand across the back of one of the plush sofas that decorated the room. It was all entirely too much for her, this decadence, but it was something that she would try to accept and get used to. “I learned a long time ago that words are wind, and they can only hurt if you allow them to. That look on Lady Jorelle’s face,” she shrugged at him, “I have seen that before. I saw it on the face of every new person I met in the North. It is the way they are. They do not trust outsiders, with good reason, truthfully. I had to earn my place in the North. I had to work for it, fight for it, every day, until I finally stopped seeing that look on every face, because by then they had seen me. Me, not the beast, or the manly creature, or the ugly woman, or anything else anyone might have said over the years. They saw me, because I was there, not giving up, doing what I was meant to be doing, every day, and not thinking of them or their opinions of me. It did not matter. They did not matter, and it doesn’t matter now."

Brienne walked back toward him and shook her head. “Bravery is not the absence of fear, Jaime, and honor is not the absence dishonesty or misdeeds. They are the result of how we handle those actions and emotions. Even a man who does everything right, every day, for his entire life can be a dishonorable one if his intent is not good. You say that you don’t deserve me, and that you aren’t good enough for me, but who gave you the right to have that opinion? Who gave anyone the right to have that opinion? It isn’t for them to say. It isn’t for you to say. I will decide what is good for me, what is deserving of my time and my attention, and certainly of my affections. Do you understand?”

How she could sound so utterly put out with him at the same time she was handing him the very thing he wanted most, Jaime would never know, but her eyes were the deepest pools of sapphire that he had ever seen, with the brightest flecks of indigo highlighting their unusual and astonishing color. There was fondness in her gaze, and affection, and something deeper, warmer, and far more passionate. Her chin was tilted at him, though, and her lips were beginning to curve in that way they
did when she thought he was being particularly idiotic. He was actually surprised she hadn’t just said as much, although he supposed in her own way she had.

“I think I do,” he said, voice soft in the quiet room. He took a step closer and laid his left hand against her waist. Jaime curled his fingers into the leather and drew her closer. “I would never mean to belittle you by trying to make your decisions for you,” he said slowly, carefully, because he did not want to misspeak, not now, not with this. It was far too important. “I would just want you to be happy.”

She laid her hand against his right arm and let it slide slowly down until her fingers circled his wrist. Brienne lifted it gently and cupped it between both her hands. “I will be the Lady of Casterly Rock, because I choose to be, and the next Evenstar because that is my birthright. If you really wish to ask my father, then you may do so, although I feel we are well past that point now, as I am a woman well and truly grown and more than capable of choosing my own path.”

As she spoke, her fingers worked open the straps and buckles that kept his golden hand affixed to his mangled stump, and when they were loosened, she gently pried the thing away and tossed it onto a heavily cushioned chair nearby. Her fingers were gentle as she peeled away the covering he used to try and protect the skin, but his stump was still red and chafed, and it ached as it always did after a full day of having worn the false appendage. Jaime said nothing, he watched her hands as they gently rubbed the aching flesh; her fingers were calloused but her touch light. His eyes lifted when she spoke again, and he found himself lost in her gaze.

“People will look at us and they will see what they choose to see,” she continued. “Many may wonder at the soundness of my mind, or they may wonder at the soundness of yours, but we will not concern ourselves with that because we can only be who we are, and our deeds will tell the truth of it.”

“Wherever did you come from?” He sighed, and did not care that he sounded wistful or even that he probably looked like a lovesick fool in that moment. He cared only that she was there, and that she was his, and by some odd and miraculous gift, that he was hers. He would never let anyone pull them apart again, not so long as there was breath in his body and the strength and will to fight in his heart.

The corners of her mouth twitched. “Tarth,” she said plainly. “It is a moderately sized island in the Stormlands, at the edge of the narrow sea, just on the cusp of Shipbreaker Bay. It is oft called the Sapphire Isle, perhaps you have heard of it?” Her brows lifted and her eyes glinted with amusement, and then she rolled them at him. “Honestly, Jaime, I am neither myth, nor legend, nor dream. I am myself, as I have always been. You know this. You have complained about it enough. I have not changed.”

“I thank the gods for that,” he said, “because I would not have you any other way, and nor do I think you would have me, and it is a terrible thought to have.” He frowned as he wondered what might have become of him, if not for her. He would be lost, surely, for she had saved him.”

“Then do not think it. Do not waste time on what shall not be,” she told him. “It does you no good.”

He looked down again and a frown drew his brows together. “You know I’ve done terrible things,” he said quietly, “many that I will never be able to make right again. Are you sure this is what you want? I know what you said, but you deserve to be with a man who is not so marked by his misdeeds.”

“Perhaps I do,” she agreed, and when he looked up at her, there was a vulnerability about him that he would not allow anyone else to see, “but this one suits me fine.”
The corners of his eyes crinkled with joy as a smile spread across his face. “How long have you been waiting to say that?”

Her lips pursed, even as they trembled with mirth. “Weeks,” she told him, “many very long weeks, months, years even…”

He cupped his hand behind her neck and drew her down. Her lips were just as soft as he remembered, and she tasted even sweeter than his mind had been able to recall. She hummed against his mouth and the sound of her, the smell of her, the way she melted against him, all lean lines and hard edges, but softer than she looked… it was everything that he had dreamed of, and longed for, and could scarcely believe was his. His lips moved to her jaw and followed the curve of it to her neck. He heard her sigh, and felt her fingers slide into his hair. Her neck arched for him, and then he found it, that spot that was meant only for him, just above the crook, and marked by three pale lines. He traced them with lips and tongue, and when his teeth scraped gently across that tender spot, her other hand went to his shoulder and her fingers dug into the leather of his jerkin.

His right arm curled around her waist and dipped low, across her hip. He could feel the ripple of muscles beneath leather and woolskin, and the way her body stretched when she arched against him. It was a fire inside him, the way they fit together, the way he knew she could wrap around him. She was no small and delicate thing, she was built for strength, and endurance, and fighting, and for him; she was built for him. She was the Warrior made flesh, the altar to which he had given himself long ago, and it made sense, oddly, that she would be for him, and he for her, because it had been like the Knights of old, and legend, and fable that he had long dreamed of being, so surely he would love the woman who was stronger and truer than all of them.

He walked her backward, lips moving across her collarbones and a low rumble in his throat when she shivered against him. She gasped at the feel of his hand, sliding down her neck to her shoulder, and lower still. Brienne felt a tug against the leather that was hugging her so tightly, and though his fingers fumbled a bit, he worked over the fastenings and then she felt his palm, and the warmth of it caressing her skin through the thin linen of her shirt was like liquid fire flowing through her veins. She helped him pull the leather away and shrugged it off her shoulders. His followed, and they almost tripped over both of them as they continued to move, but neither of them seemed to care. Her hands were back in his hair then, and she was drawing his mouth back to hers. His beard tickled and scraped against her skin in turn, but she did not mind the feel of it.

His hands tugged at her shirt, pulled it up and over her head. While her fingers were working open the laces of his. Their eyes met, gazes burning, all need and want. His shirt was tossed aside and then his hands moved to the waist of her breeches, and he found not laces but tiny catches fastened into eyelets. His eyes shot up, filled with surprise, but when her brow arched and her mouth curved into a crooked, knowing smile, a low growl rumbled in his throat. She had planned this, had dressed with the thought of his being able to easily remove her garments. “Devious wench.”

The backs of her legs bumped against a low, plush bench, and she sat down in front of him. Together they removed her boots, and then his, and while she worked open the front of his trousers he pushed his hand into her hair and gripped the back of her head. He bent forward and claimed her mouth again. He drew her up, and the slow slide of her body against his, soft skin and the desire hardened peeks of her nipples against his chest made him shudder with need. He was painfully hard against the solid muscle of her thigh, but her arms were wrapped around his shoulders and he cared for nothing but the warmth of her pressed so close.

It was almost too much, but not enough, and she needed him inside her. The walls of her center rippled, contracted in anticipation of being filled. It was a deep, yearning ache, and every step, every stumbled shuffle as they moved across the room created a friction between her thighs that was too
fleeting to be sweet.

They left his trousers and her breeches lying on the floor near the table where her meal had gone untouched and did not stop until they had moved into the bedchamber. There was a fire burning in the hearth, and he was thankful that it was warm, for he did not intend to let her dress again until someone came to pry them from her bed.

The bath that her squire had arranged was in the large, oval tub in front of the fire. There was still a faint haze of steam rising from the water. Jaime maneuvered her toward it. As he helped her over the edge, a smirk twisted at his lips. “Worry not, I’ll pull you out if you faint.”

She nipped at his lips and huffed a sigh. “Gods, you are a fool.”

“Your fool,” he reminded her, and stepped into the tub with her.

They were not the last words they spoke that afternoon, but they would be the most coherent for quite some time.

- TBC -

Chapter End Notes

For once I wanted him to be the one to freak out while she knows what she wants and what she is going to have.

I've also seen Jaime likened, quite often, to the "Warrior made flesh" and I can see that... but it's Brienne. She is not the Maiden, she is the Warrior, again just my opinion. :)

Thank you everyone for all the comments! I have not been able to reply to all of them, and I want you to know how appreciated they are.
A short Arya & Gendry chapter because I have not forgotten about them.

It wasn’t until they were alone, when Ser Davos and Lord Selwyn had gone that Gendry was finally able to scowl at Arya with all of the frustration, hurt, and longing that he had been feeling. “What was that? I can make my own introductions. I don’t need you to treat me like I’m your charity case, Arya.” He practically spat her name and put emphasis on it, and on the fact that he had dropped her title. If she wasn’t a lady then he wouldn’t bother treating her like one.

“I was just trying to help.” She scowled back at him, and would not admit that it stung to have her assistance rejected so easily, no matter what she had done or said to him. She thought he knew her, her, the real her, not the girl everyone wanted her to be. “I’ve been here longer, I actually know Lord Selwyn,” she shot back at him, “and if it didn’t escape your notice, there was a pathetic old lion desperately waiting to be alone with Brienne. I was helping her too,” she told him, because she would never admit to helping a Lannister, especially that Lannister.

“Well I don’t need your help,” Gendry’s lip curled with disgust. It wasn’t just about him. Of course not, why would it be? “I don’t need you to play Lady when it suits your purpose.” He turned away from her then, because if he didn’t, Gendry didn’t know if he would kiss her or throttle her. She had always been frustrating to him, and even more so now.

“You don’t even know where you’re going,” Arya shouted after him.

“Then I’ll get lost,” Gendry yelled back.

She watched his retreating back. Arya groaned in frustration. “Why are you such an idiot?”

“Me?” Gendry whirled to face her. “I am an idiot?” His blue eyes sparked with fury. “Why? Because I’m not riding off to fight in every battle or war that breaks out for the sake of killing people who wronged me? I would rather be an idiot and be alive than be a corpse whose need for revenge was more important than people who cared about them.”

“That’s not true!” She stalked toward him. “That’s why I did it, you great ass, so that the people I care about would be safe. Cersei was the last one; I had to be here. I had to make sure that she never hurt my family again. What did you think I was going to do? Stay in Winterfell and warm your furs until it was time for you to ride south and claim your castle? Is that what would please Lord Gendry?”

“I never wanted a fucking castle;” he snarled at her. “I wanted you, but you’re too bloody stubborn and pig-headed to see it. I’ll take the fucking castle, since that’s what I’m supposed to do now, but I never wanted it and I didn’t ask for it. Stop acting like all of this was something that I planned. I didn’t.”

“Then don’t.” Arya took another step and stopped right in front of him. “You don’t have to go to Storm’s End. You don’t have to do anything. Go where you want, do what you want. You’d make a
good Lord, Gendry, I meant that. I think the people of Storm’s End would really like you, and you would be fair and kind, and you would work hard. If that’s what you want, but you don’t have to.”

He stood very still. He could feel his heart pounding suddenly, beating harder than any hammer ever could. Gendry stared into her grey eyes. “But the Queen,” he began.

“Fuck the Queen,” Arya growled. “Just because she wants to be a ruler of things doesn’t mean everyone does, or that they should. She rewarded you because you fought for her, and probably because she thought you would be loyal and she needs that right now, but I don’t care. You’re Gendry, so just be Gendry. Use your hammer,” she told him, “and make things. Make a thousand bull helms if you want, but don’t just go to Storm’s End because you think you have to.”

Gendry studied her face. He saw the way her emotions tracked, the way her eyes sparked with light and shadows. She was beautiful, she had always been. He knew she didn’t think so, and that she didn’t care about that, but she was. To him she was. She was Arry, and she was Arya, and she was the girl that wanted to be his family because neither one of them had anyone else in the whole world. He wanted that too. He wanted it more than anything, but she had turned him away and nothing else had ever cut as deep.

“Is that why you don’t want to be a lady?” He took a step toward her and let his voice drop. “You don’t want to have to do things because people expect them of you?”

“It isn’t me.” She shrugged at him. “It never was. I’m a wolf, not a lady, and I’m not staying here when all this is done. I wanted to make sure my family will be safe, but then I’m leaving. I want to see what’s west of Westeros, and then I’ll go back and see Myr, and Valyria, or even Asshai, I might even go as far as the Jade Sea. I don’t know, but I want to see the world.” Arya drew a breath and felt it shudder through her. She had never been more nervous, not when she had gone to the House of Black and White for the first time, or when she had gone to the Twins, or even when she finally returned to Winterfell. “I wanted you to come with me,” she admitted quietly, “but if you want to stay and be Lord of Storm’s End, then you’ll stay. I’ll come back, from time to time, because I’ll have to check on my pack, and I can tell you about it all, but I won’t be your lady, Gendry.”

She made it sound so easy, to just leave and go where she wanted. He thought about sailing across all the seas, about seeing all the lands. It would be a kind of freedom that he had never known before. He chewed on the inside of his cheek. It would be hard to pound steel on a ship, but there would be land, ports, places to be explored. He could almost see it; days spent wandering through the tall, green grasses of the Great Dothraki Sea, and nights lying underneath the stars. Gendry moved closer. “What if you were just my family and not milady?” He looked down at her, saw the way her eyes widened and felt hope surge through him.

Her brows lifted, even as she felt her heart flutter and her stomach clench. “And it won’t bother you if I fight, and where breeches, or drink ale and carry a sword?”

“You’re the strongest fighter I know,” he shrugged, “why would that ever bother me?” Gendry frowned at her. “Even if we went to Storm’s End, I wouldn’t care if you wore pants and carried a sword. I wouldn’t care if you spent all day in the yards with the men-at-arms or whatever it is people do in castles. I just wanted to be with you, Arya. I don’t care if that’s at Storm’s End, or Winterfell, or on a boat, or in the middle of the Jade Sea.”

A smile lit her face, for just a moment. And then she hit him. Her fist landed against his shoulder and she scowled darkly. “Then why didn’t you just say that, idiot!”

He winced as she hit him, but before he could do anything else she was leaping at him. Gendry caught her with ease and wrapped his thick, muscled arms around her slight form. Her mouth was on
his in the next moment and then he stopped thinking altogether. She was there, she was alive, and she would be with him. He would be with her, and they would go and do whatever they wanted, and be whatever they wanted.

She laughed as she kissed him. He was a stupid boy, but he was her stupid boy. Arya wound her arms around his neck and held on as though her life were dependent upon it. She lifted her head and looked down at him. “We’ll go to Storm’s End first,” she declared. “We’ll send a raven, and we’ll get Hot Pie, and you’ll find your friends here. They’ll all go with us. And Sandor,” she told him, “he’s going too.” She said it with absolute finality, because she would not budge on that point.

Gendry’s brows drew together. “But you don’t want to be a lady,” he reminded her, puzzled. “We don’t have to go there. I’m not going to make you—”

“You’re not.” Arya grinned at him. “I’m choosing. I won’t be a lady, I’ll be Arya. And you won’t be a lord. You’ll just be Gendry. Storm’s End will be your home,” because she knew he had never had one, not really. “We’ll see what needs setting right, and we’ll do it, and our friends will help us. We’ll make it a place for anyone who doesn’t have anywhere to go, a place for people who just don’t fit. Like you, and me, and Hot Pie…”

“And the Hound.” He grinned at her as understanding began to set in. “But what about going west? And Asshai, and the Jade Sea. I thought you wanted to see all of that? I’m not going to keep you from exploring, Arya. I won’t let that happen, not for me.”

“You won’t,” she promised. “I’m still going to go, and you’re going to go with me. But we’ll come back, from time to time, because we have people here. Because the pack hunts, and it roams, but it always comes home. We’ll need a place, a place that is ours, and you have one. That’s what stewards and castellans are for. Sansa will help us find the right people, and Ser Davos will help too.”

“Maybe he could even go with us?” Gendry looked at her hopefully. He thought he might like that, the old smuggler who had saved his life. “When he’s able. I know he has responsibilities, and I think he has a wife, or had a wife. I’m not really sure.”

“She died,” Arya frowned. She had learned a little bit about the man in the last few weeks. “Not long after their son died. He doesn’t have anyone. Except you,” she realized, “and his friends here. He’s Master of Ships, so I think that would work. He will have to do… trade things with places across the sea.”

“He misses it, I think,” Gendry told her. “The sailing, I mean. He could help us with finding the right ship and crews and all of that,” because what did they know of sailing the seas. They didn’t, just as they didn’t know anything about having a Keep and taking care of their people. They could learn. He grinned widely. “You’re absolutely insane, you know that, don’t you? This is utterly mad!”

“I know.” She kissed him again. “That’s what makes it so great.”

Gendry set back on her feet. “Should we go and tell anyone, do you think? How do we actually make it happen?”

“We just do it.” Arya shrugged. It was that simple, she thought. “We will tell people, but maybe not just yet.” Her eyes glittered happily when she looked up at him. “Right now I think we should go and find your rooms… make sure you’re properly settled in and have everything you need.”

“I have everything I need,” he said earnestly, and it had nothing at all to do with his rooms or his things. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth and his blue eyes sparkled. “But you’re right. We
should go and… sort all that out.”

She took his hand as they walked back toward the Keep. “Later I’ll show you all the secret passages, and where Tyrion shot his father, Lord Tywin.” Arya smirked at him, because they had been at Harrenhal together, and she knew that would interest him. “Tomorrow,” she continued, “you can show me Flea Bottom and the Street of Steel. I haven’t gone yet. I was waiting for you.”

He squeezed her hand as they walked. “I’m here now.” Whatever else they did or saw, that was the one thing that mattered most.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah... why can't they just do what they want? Arya has been saying since S1/book1 "that's not me" and I believe her. That doesn't mean she can't have her guy, and since when does Gendry want to be a Lord of anything? He wants a home, I am sure.. but I think he would be happier with a home, a forge, and Arya "I'll be your family" Stark close by.

Let them travel, make weapons, practice with the weapons, and make a home for people like them who are just not like anyone else. Why the heck not? :)

-TBC-
Jon saw Sansa to her rooms himself. While the maids made sure that she had everything she needed, including a bath and a quick luncheon, he had two Northmen stand guard outside her door. He had gone to take care of a few matters that still needed his attention, but then he had returned so that they could take supper together.

It was not an overly rich meal, but they settled at a table near the wide windows and watched the swoop of gulls in the bay through the fluttering drapes while the sun slowly sank lower in the sky. While they enjoyed soup, and a freshly baked brown bread, with cheese and fruit and a rich, red Arbor wine, Jon passed a rolled scroll into his sister’s hands.

“What is this?” Sansa slipped the black ribbon from the parchment and unrolled it. She drew a quick breath as she read through the finely drawn letters. “Jon Stark of Winterfell,” she whispered. “The Queen did this?” Part of her was still suspicious. She did not know if she would ever be able to fully trust the other woman.

“Aye,” he said. “She gave it to me just before you arrived. Maybe if we had known exactly when you’d arrive, you could have been here,” he gently teased. Sansa was not prone to such impetuous behavior. It surprised him, and having her arrive safely, he delighted in it too.

“I wish I had been.” She studied it again. Seeing his name, his real name, for he should have always been Jon Stark, she thought, written before her was more than she thought they would ever have. “I wish father was here,” she added. “He would be happy about this Jon, I really think he would.”

“I like to think so.” He watched as she rolled the parchment, hands holding it as though it were something delicate. “I’ve hardly had a moment to really let it sink in. It’s all I ever wanted, to be a Stark, like the rest of you.” He took it from her when she gave it back to him and held it to his chest for a moment before he tucked it back inside the folds of his jerkin.

“You always were a Stark,” she said fervently. “Every bit as much as me, or Robb, or any of us. You were our brother, and you still are.” Sansa lowered her gaze for a moment. “We were awful to you, mother and I, and I’ll never be able to make up for that, but the way we acted doesn’t change the truth of what is.”

“I’ve already forgiven you for that,” Jon reminded her, “not that I think there was anything to forgive. We were children,” he shrugged, “and we fought like children.”

“Now we’re adults,” she said, “and I suppose we should fight like that too.” She lifted her chin and met his gaze. “I am sorry for betraying your confidence. I trust Tyrion. He protected me before. He’s a good man, and I thought… I thought if he had any doubt, if it wasn’t just me, that he might be able to do something, that he could keep you safe, keep all of us safe.”

“But he didn’t do that, did he?” Jon scowled at her. He had already decided to forgive her, and he
wasn’t angry with her anymore, not truly, but they had to talk about it, else it might fester. “He told Lord Varys, and then Varys began sending ravens, telling other lords throughout Westeros that there was an heir to the throne, a better option than the Dragon Queen who had come to conquer our land. He turned on his own queen when she needed him the most, and he paid the price for it. I told you, and Bran, and Arya because you’re my family, because I couldn’t keep something this big inside me anymore. I wasn’t ready for anyone else to know, Sansa. I didn’t even know who I was anymore. My whole life had been a lie—”

“Your life was not a lie!” She glared at him. “Our father loved you. Uncle Benjen loved you. You were always Robb’s favorite, and there was never anyone else that Rickon would settle down for. He was always too wild, except when you were with him. Arya worshipped you, she still does, and Bran…”

“I know that!” When she jumped at the sound of his raised voice, Jon took a long breath and closed his eyes. “I know that,” he said more calmly. “I understand it now, better than I did then. But I had just found out, Sansa. In the space of a single night I went from being Jon Snow, the King who bent his knee to the Dragon Queen to save his people from the Army of the Dead, to being Aegon Targaryen, son of one of the most hated men in all the North. In a single night, every hard and hateful word that Lady Catelyn ever said to me came true. I was the abomination she always thought I was, because it wasn’t enough that I wasn’t really Ned Stark’s son, or that Rhaegar Targaryen had sired me, or that my parents had started a war that nearly destroyed the Kingdoms. I laid with my own blood, my own aunt. When I should be thinking of how to protect the North, how to protect all the realms of men from the Night King and his army, all I could think about was how much I still wanted her.” He watched the play of emotions in her eyes, the shock and the hurt, and finally the sympathy, or maybe it was pity. Jon didn’t know. He couldn’t bear it so he looked away. “My entire world was on fire, and darkness was coming for all of us. Then we won, but it wasn’t over yet. I told you once, how tired I was of fighting. I didn’t know what else to do. I thought if I told you, and Bran and Arya, that would make it okay. I thought you’d tell me that it was okay, but you didn’t do that, Sansa. I needed you and—”

“And I failed you.” She reached forward and gripped his hand. She wound her long, slim fingers around his and held on as tightly as she could. “I am sorry, I am. It was wrong, I know that, but I don’t trust her, Jon. I don’t trust anyone who isn’t us, who isn’t family. I can’t. Trusting other people nearly destroyed me, and I will not do it again, not without knowing them. I didn’t know her, I still don’t.” Every part of her ached with sorrow, while tears burned behind her eyes. Sansa held them back. She had learned, long ago, the punishment for revealing any weakness. “You are my family, and I will do what I have to do to protect you, to protect our pack. I will not apologize for that. Not to you, not to the Queen, not to anyone.”

“I wish you could hear yourself.” Jon shook his head at her. “I wish she could hear you. The two of you are more alike than you know. You would both do anything to protect the people you love, and to protect the people who look to you to lead them. You’re so strong Sansa, stronger than I ever thought you could be. It was you that brought the North back together. It was you that got Winterfell back. You’re the one that kept it all going. It’s why we’ll name you Wardeness of the North.” He sighed. “But she doesn’t trust you either. Dany doesn’t know you, either.”

She pulled away from him and folded her hands in her lap again. “I would trust her a lot more if she would allow the North to remain independent. We earned that,” she reminded him, a hard edge to her tone. “We paid for it in blood.”

“Aye, we did.” Jon shrugged, “but it isn’t going to happen. At least not right now. Winter is here, and the North needs the southron kingdoms right now, just as much as those kingdoms need the North. We’ve got to rebuild it, and we have to make sure the people survive the coming snows and
cold rains. There has to be peace before there can be compromise, Sansa.”

“You’re finally starting to sound like a King,” she sighed, “just when you’ve given your crown away.” She studied her hands and fought the urge to wring her fingers. “I’d have gladly followed you, you know, on the Iron Throne. It would have mattered less then if the North was independent.”

“I know.” It was Jon that leaned forward this time. He placed one of his wide palms over both of hers. “Trust me now, Sansa. I will never let anything bad happen to you again, and I won’t let it happen to the North either. It’s going to be different this time, I swear it.”

“How?” She shook her head at him. “How can you swear that? How can you know? We always think that it will be different, but it’s always just more of the same. Tell me, Jon, how is this different? How is she different? Her father burned people, she burns people; that doesn’t seem all that different to me.”

“Father always said that he who passed the sentence should carry out the punishment,” Jon reminded her. “When he sentenced a man to death, it was his sword that brought the end. I tried to live by that, even when it was hard, or it seemed impossible, I did it.” He rested his elbows on his knees and took both her hands in his. “When Daenerys sentences a man to death, she uses her dragon to carry out the sentence. Not a sword, or a dagger, or a noose. It isn’t easy to watch.” He’d had some dark nights and even darker dreams after watching Varys’s execution. “But no death should ever be easy to watch. The Queen carries out her own justice. There’s honor in that, even if there’s no kindness in it.”

“Was there honor when she killed the Tarlys?” Sansa stared hard at him. “Sam is your best friend. They were his father and brother. Was it honor when she burned them for refusing to bend the knee to her?”

“She warned them,” he told her. “And she felt regret that it was necessary, especially with Dickon, but she tried, Sansa. Tyrion tried to get both of them to bend the knee, and it was only supposed to be Lord Tarly from the first. It was Dickon that refused to let his father stand alone.” He leaned away from her, straightening again and shook his head. “Lady Olenna Tyrell was the Queen’s ally, and she was their liege. Cersei had just destroyed her entire family. Lady Olenna had every reason not to support her, but the Lords of the Reach turned on House Tyrell. They took her home. They took her gold. They killed her men… and then Jaime Lannister handed her a merciful death and she took it. Where was the honor in that?”

“I am the last person to ask of honor where the Lannisters are concerned,” Sansa reminded him sharply. She is willing to give Ser Jaime, Lord Jaime now, she supposed, the benefit of the doubt for one reason, and that was the woman that had protected her so well. “I knew Lady Olenna,” she told him. “She was kind to me. She tried to save me, in her own way, and Queen Margaery was a friend to me, when I had none. I am sorry for their loss, I truly am.” Sansa looked away from him, out the windows and toward the bay. “I had not heard the full story of how Higharden was lost. That does… change things,” she admitted, however reluctantly.

“It was Daenerys that told Sam. Did you know that?” Jon asked, not letting up now that he knew he was finally getting through to her. He saw the weakening in her resolve and he pounded at it. “She faced him and she told him what she’d done. She didn’t let him hear it from someone else. She let him look her in the eye and know the face of the woman that took his father and brother. Would Cersei have done that? Or Joffrey? Or Robert? Could you?”

“I want to think I could,” she said quietly. “I did it with Littlefinger.” Sansa met his gaze again. She tried to read the certainty in his eyes to see if he was trying to convince her or himself. “You truly
believe in her, don’t you? This isn’t just pride or stubbornness. You really think she will be a good Queen?"

“I truly do,” he said thickly, with all the conviction of that belief filling him. “She wants to be good. She wants to change things, and make them better. Not just for people like us, but for everyone.”

Sansa stared at him. “You love her.” She had said it before and he tried to evade the discussion. Her eyes narrowed. “Even now, knowing everything you do, you still love her.”

Jon lowered his gaze for a moment and bowed his head. “I do,” he said quietly. “I really do. Gods help me. I tried not to, in the beginning, and then I tried to stop after… but it isn’t… I don’t think I want to.” He looked up at her, and let her see all of the pain and the fear, and the shame.

She gasped at the force of his emotions. Jon had always worn his heart on his sleeve. He was the most sensitive of all of them, always brooding and silent. It was hurting him, what he felt, and she ached for him. She thought of everyone they had lost, all the chances gone and turned to ash or dust. Jon had wanted nothing more in his life than to love and be loved in return. He was asking for her approval, she realized. Sansa’s eyes widened. She was his sister, but he had Arya too, if it was just advice he wanted. Though she couldn’t imagine Jon ever having a conversation like this with Arya. No, she was also the head of his House. He was the elder, but she was the Lady of Winterfell. It would be to her to approve or deny matches for those of their House, to arrange the marriages that would bring them the better alliances. For just a moment, as she thought of her own failed matches, the idea made her sick. How could she, who had been used and traded, do the same to others? She wouldn’t, she decided. Sansa would not allow that to happen, not in her House, not to her family, nor to anyone else she was meant to protect. People would wed who they loved, or deny who they feared.

Sansa’s jaw clenched. She felt the press of tears behind her eyes and shook her head. “Then don’t,” she whispered. “If you love her, then you should be with her.” She watched his eyes widen with shock and wonder. “Jon,” she reached for his hand again. “I let a man I hate stay in my home because I knew it would make someone I care for happy. How could I do any less than that for my own brother?”

He turned his hand over beneath hers and gripped her fingers. “Then you don’t think it’s wrong? That I’m… that I shouldn’t, just because we’re related?” That was still his fear, that somehow he would doom them all if he crossed that line again.

“You are a Stark of Winterfell,” she stated imperiously. A single, perfectly sculpted brow arched. “You are a wolf of the north. Let he who thinks he can tame the dragon be the first to pass judgment.”

“You can’t actually tame dragons,” he pointed out, “you know that, right?”

“Do they?” She smirked at him.

“Probably not.” He leaned back in his chair, more relieved than he could say. “I should probably tell you, we’ve also got ourselves a pet lion.”

“I was afraid that would happen at some point.” Sansa rolled her eyes at him. “Now would be a good time for you to tell me everything. Start at the beginning, I would have this story whole so that I might actually understand how it is that we keep collecting strays.”

Jon grinned at her. “Aye, I’ll tell it. First…” he leaned forward and poured wine for both of them. “I have missed you, sister.”
“As I have missed you.” She took the wine from him with a smile. “We will have to get used to absences and reunions.”

“We will,” he agreed, “but for now we are together, and soon Bran will be with us too. Let’s drink to that, and to the coming spring.”

Her expression melted into a warm, fond smile. “Winter is always coming, Jon. You know that.”

“It is,” he nodded, “but even in winter… when the white winds blow, there is hope, as long as the pack is together.”

She would hold her pack together, even as they scattered across the kingdoms. Sansa lifted her glass with a nod. “To spring then.”

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

I never felt like Sansa was being malicious. Foolish, yes, but not malicious. I took it as more poor choices for the last half of S8. Also, I think Jon would forgive her, that’s just his nature.
“Tell me.” The afternoon had grown much later when finally either of them spoke again. It was Brienne, as she lay on her stomach, head pillowed atop her arms. She watched him and the way the shadows played across his face as light beyond the single, narrow window in the bedchamber faded and the fire in the hearth slowly died to barely glowing embers.

Jaime knew what she was asking but he drew the tip of his scarred stump up the length of her spine and focused on the feel of her soft skin stead. “I dreamt of this.” His voice rumbled quietly between them. “Well, not exactly of this, but of you, lying as you are now, with me. We were at—”

“Riverrun.” She lifted her head and propped it in her hand. “I told you I would come to you, but you seemed rather resolved to die instead.” Brienne sighed. “Foolish man.”

“I also seem to recall you saying that you would arrive at sunset, and yet…” He lifted his head to look toward the window. “Not quite yet,” he quipped.

“That only means the future is fluid, and not set in stone,” she told him, repeating something that she had overheard Bran say to Lady Sansa. “Jaime.” She reached over and laid a hand on his chest. “Tell me.” He had not been sleeping, and she knew that couldn’t only be about missing her.

A long, heavy sigh escaped him. He would rather talk about how it was that they seemed to be sharing dreams, and how odd it was that they both just accepted that fact rather than questioning their own sanity. “I don’t want to talk about her while I’m lying in your bed,” he said. When she lifted her hand to cup his cheek, he turned his face into her palm. “It was my fault,” he whispered. “It was my fault that any of it happened, and instead of helping her like I promised, I turned my back on her and helped her enemies take everything away.”

“You are not responsible for your sister’s decisions,” Brienne frowned at him. “You’re not, Jaime. You did not force her to do the things that she has done. You’ve made mistakes, yes, and they are numerous and terrible, but Cersei chose her path, and she chose the manner in which she walked it.”

“I told her we would make everyone pay for all the wrong they’d done us.” He pushed her hand away and sat up in the bed. “After father died, and what the High Sparrow had done to her, and…” His jaw clenched. He thought of Myrcella and the grief was still as raw and fresh as it had been the day his beautiful girl died. “I told her we would kill them all,” he rasped desperately, “that we would take everything back, that nothing in this world mattered but us. I said the words,” he looked at her, guilt and pain in his eyes, “and then she did exactly that. The High Sparrow took Tommen from her, Uncle Kevan and Lady Olenna turned on her, and she was certain that Margaery had made a deal with the High Sparrow for her brother’s life… so she destroyed them all. I never imagined she would do it quite like that, and I should have stopped her after, but… Olenna was supposed to be in the Sept too, and when it came time to crush her, as Cersei had crushed the others…” He closed his eyes against the misery and the guilt. “I took the Reach from her, and then I took Highgarden, and then I gave her the poison that killed her. All of it because I had promised Cersei that we would destroy the people who had hurt us, but I didn’t think…” Jaime opened his eyes again and looked at her, they were bright with moisture and self-loathing, “I didn’t really mean for any of it to actually happen, not like that. Myrcella had just died. I had just given her body back to Cersei, and she was shutting down. You remember what she was like when Joffrey died. There was none of that with Myrcella. There was no rage, there was no grief, there was no anything, she was just… there. It wasn’t Cersei.” Jaime
shook his head at her. “I had never seen her like that before, never. I think I would have said anything, done anything, in that moment to bring her back, and I did. I said it and she clung to it. She held on to it, she made it real, and it destroyed her. I destroyed her.”

“No. Jaime.” Brienne sat up and reached for him. He tried to shrug her off but she cupped his face and made him look at her. “Cersei destroyed herself. She took her grief, and your grief, and all that rage, and she wrapped it around herself like a cloak. She wanted to make the kingdoms hurt, like she was hurting, but none of what she took could ever fill that hole, so she kept taking, and she kept hurting, and that is what destroyed her. You stopped. Later than you should, certainly, but all the bad that you’ve done does not erase all the good. Do you think that I don’t know who you are? I know you are a vain, caustic, spiteful man, but I have seen the good, too. I have seen the honor in you. It is in the remorse you feel for the things you’ve done. I see it, every time you looked at Bran at Winterfell. I see it now. I know that there is warmth, and love, and kindness in you. I feel it, every time we’re together.”

“She’s gone,” he said. “They sent her to Dragonstone. She’ll stay there until the child is born, and then Daenerys will try her for her crimes, and she will die.” He curled his hand around one of her wrists and held on to her. She was the one thing that kept him grounded and sane in a world he no longer fully recognized. “Queen Daenerys has named me Lord Paramount of the Westerlands and Warden of the West. As the head of House Lannister and Lord of Casterly Rock, I will have the opportunity to try and atone for some of the wrong that was done, but Cersei will die, it is assured.”

“I am sorry for that,” she said quietly, and the compassion in her eyes was genuine. There had been too much death already. “I wish there was a way to save her, for your sake, and Tyrion’s, but it will be a kindness too.” She felt him stiffen and leaned forward to place her lips against the corner of his mouth. “Let her be at peace, Jaime. She has watched her children die, before they were even fully grown. She has fought and lost, now let her rest; that is the kindness that we can do for your sister now.”

Jaime tipped his head forward and turned his face into her neck. “I do not know what I did to deserve such as you, but the Gods must have thought me worthy, for you are surely a gift.”

“I am not.” She pulled back to look at him. Her fingers brushed over his hair. “I have told you, I am only myself, as I have always been.” Her lips curved toward a small smile. “But if you must look for cause, then look no farther than the bear. It was your madness, I am sure, that frightened it to inaction.”

“I remember that moment quite differently,” he replied, “I recall quite a lot of teeth and snarling.”

“Yes.” Her lips trembled with mirth. “You were very fearsome.”

“Well my ego shall never need pruning with you about, Ser, that is for certain.” Jaime took her hand in his again and looked down at it. “The Queen and Lord Stark proposed that the child be raised here, as a ward of the Crown, but I could not…” Jaime frowned. He looked up at her, and for a moment his eyes were desperate again. He probably should have told her what he’d done before the promises he made earlier, but he hoped she would already know. She must, surely, if she believed him to have honor. “The child will come to me, to be raised in the Westerlands, a Hill of Casterly Rock.”

“A Hill?” Her brows drew together. “You would be okay with that?” A breeze of cool air touched her shoulders and she was reminded of their state of undress, so as they spoke she moved from the bed. Her saddlebags had been placed on a chair and Brienne moved to one of them to pull a shirt from the items folded inside it.
“That my child will know the shame of being a bastard? Of course not.” Jaime frowned as he watched her. He leaned back against the thick oak headboard and pulled the thick linens around his waist. “What else am I to do? I will not allow the child to be raised in the capital by strangers, and it matters not to me what we call it. The child may not be a Lannister in name, but we care for our own, though appearances may say otherwise. I know I should have waited to consult with you,” he began, but stopped when she scowled at him. “What?”

“Do you think I would deny you the rights of your child?” She felt offended by the very idea of it. Brienne walked back to the bed, a shirt now draped across her shoulders, though she had not bothered with the laces. She sat beside him, but kept her hands at her sides, and her eyes studied him closely for any signs of doubt. “Who is it, exactly, that you think to wed, Jaime Lannister? It must not be me, who has been my father’s only heir for most of my life, who was raised alone with the benefit of too little family, and the weight of my family’s future resting solely upon my shoulders.”

He drew a breath and thought carefully about the words he should say. He had not thought of her when he demanded the right of raising his child, that was true, but he had considered it later, and he did not think there was cause for concern. “I would not presume,” he said slowly, choosing his words deliberately, “to place this responsibility upon you.” He huffed a sigh when her brow arched. “I am a greedy man, I would have you both, but I haven’t thought much beyond that.”

She rolled her eyes at him then. “You never do.” Brienne leaned back beside him, their shoulders touching. “I did not think of it either,” she admitted. Her gaze drifted to the dying embers of the fire. “Truly, I did not let myself think of any of the possible outcomes. I gave up on such ideas long ago. I would not even allow myself the room to hope that…” She shook her head. “I knew what I felt for you, and I knew that it was an impossible dream, until it wasn’t. I have always known that Cersei would be there, between us, in some form or another. I could not love you and not know that,” she looked at him then. “She is too much a part of you, of who you are and the things you have done. Asking you to forget her would be asking you to forget part of yourself, even if there was not a child to consider. I will not pretend that it does not lend a new complication to matters that are already quite complicated, but I could not deny you a child that I know you would love. I would not ask you to make that choice, it is not in me to do so, and even if it were… part of me would fear that you would not choose me, but a greater part of me fears that you would. I would not choose to be the cause of such dishonor, I would sooner leave you than suggest it.”

Somehow he had known that would be her response, or perhaps his heart had known it, and it was only his mind that was slow to the realization. She never aspired for more than to serve those she thought worthy and to do what was right. There was no one better that he had ever known. “You would not be you,” he said thickly, “if you would ask that choice of me. I would have you to wife, or I would have no one, alliances be damned. There will be children, or there will not, we are not Bran Stark with his ability to see everything that is and all the possibilities our actions create.”

She had not thought of children beyond the duty she owed to her House and the people of her island. It was an idea that did not yet seem real. She did not think her mind would be able to fully grasp it until it happened. If it happened. A part of her wondered that it was even possible after all the fights, and battles, and injuries she had endured throughout the years. The idea of children and heirs for both their houses was not what bound them together, however, and she believed him when he said it would happen or not as the fates allowed.

“I know nothing of raising children,” she told him, “and have experienced little of them outside the knowledge that it would be my duty to provide an heir for Tarth. I know the stain of being a bastard is not a kind one, but I hope there is kindness enough in me to prevent a child from suffering needlessly.” She sighed. “If you intend to raise this child, and have it know you as its father, then a Lannister it should be, and not a Hill. If there is a child for us, then he or she shall have Tarth. If there
“There are other concerns,” he tipped his head against the hard oak of the headboard. “The Queen will not legitimize the child unless there are no other heirs for House Lannister, she has already said as much. She does not trust me, and with good reason, nor do I trust her.” His face settled into a deep scowl. “I am not convinced she is the ruler we need, but she is what we have. Once our betrothal is announced, she will have even less reason to trust me. The child will be a Hill, and it may well be safer that way. Ned Stark had the right of it there, the honorable old ass.”

She rolled her eyes at the slight to her Lady’s father, and clasped her hands in her lap. “I am the Queen’s cousin,” she stated, “and you suggest she would think you would use me to usurp the throne?”

“That is exactly what I fear she would think.” Jaime had spent some very sleepless nights trying to avoid those dark thoughts, but they were there, present in his mind, and haunted his dreams. “Brienne, you do not see yourself as others do, but I do, I always have. Even before I knew you had blood ties to House Targaryen, and even in spite of that, I would choose you to rule these Kingdoms over a thousand other options that could be put before us. You are good, and honorable, and stronger than anyone I have ever met, and I don’t mean your height or ability to swing a sword, for those are surely something to behold as well.” He smiled at her when she scowled at him. “You are a Hero of Winterfell, the first woman to be named Knight of the Seven Kingdoms, the only person in this land that has ever beaten the Hound in single combat, a protector of House Stark, a former Kingsguard to Renly Baratheon, by the gods, what have you not done?” His grin grew wider when she appeared to slump beside him, as though somehow weighed down by her own accomplishments, or the legend they had become. “You even get all the credit for the bloody bear! You troublesome woman, they will sing songs about you if they do not already.”

She elbowed him, hard, but he only laughed. Her eyes flashed with annoyance. “I will not be mocked, Jaime Lannister.”

“Brienne, I mean it. You will be remembered long after we are all gone. You will be the Lady of Casterly Rock, and so the West would rise up for you. As Evenstar, you will be Lady Paramount of the Stormlands, and so you would have Tarth, and all the armies of Storm’s End, Cape Wrath, Mistwood, and even Griffin’s Roost. The North would follow you, I think, with or without the Lady of Winterfell, but Sansa Stark would surely give you the entirety of her army. The North remembers, and you have served them well. Edmure Tully would sooner see my head launched into the Narrow Sea from a trebuchet, but with House Stark behind you, you would also have the Riverlands, and I do not know what Robin Arryn would do, but Lord Royce would give you the Mountain and the Vale. Tormund fucking Giantsbane would bring you the free folk,” he added, lip curling in distaste for the wildling. “Even the Unsullied and Dothraki look on you with respect. They would never turn from their Queen, but they have fought beside you, and trained with you, and know what you are capable of on the battlefield. It is skill and strength they admire, and you have plenty enough of both. If she managed to push them too far, though I think Ned Stark walking into this room would be more likely, what would Daenerys have left? Dorne? The Reach? What is left of the Iron Islands? While you could rally the might of five kingdoms, the far north, and warriors of Essos if you so chose to try, of course she will fear you, Brienne. You are the single most dangerous threat to her seat upon that twisted and cursed throne, and I could damn well throttle your father for putting that burden upon you. He should have kept you on that island, put you in chains, or locked you in a tower to keep you safe. But he did not, and you are here, and we will have to be wary.”

“Why?” Brienne was staring at him. Her eyes were wide and she blinked several times with disbelief. “Jaime… that would not happen. The Kingdoms could very well rise up against Queen Daenerys, no one’s rule is ever guaranteed, but they would not do it for me. I am not… there is no reason that
anyone would ever gather armies for the heir to a minor house from an island in the middle of the Narrow Sea. The very idea is completely preposterous. You’re as mad as you believe her to be if you think that would ever happen. Yes, there are people that I have served well, and I would like to believe that should I ever need help, they would come to my aid. But to raise whole armies, it doesn’t even bear thinking of. It is complete and utter insanity,” she declared.

His face softened into a gentle smile. It was as he thought. She would never, ever, see herself as anything more than a Knight meant to serve and bring honor to herself and her House. She had not, he realized, truly wrapped her head around the implications of her father’s birth until that moment. “It will put the idea in the heads of some, the Dragon Queen most assuredly has already considered all of this. What she does not know is what I, and Sansa Stark, and Davos Seaworth, and the entirety of the North already know. Were you nothing more than Brienne of Tarth, future Evenstar, we would still follow you. There is no one better or more honorable, but you would never seek it, and those of us who love you would never ask it of you because we know that we have placed burden enough upon those shoulders of yours, strong though they may be.”

Her head struck the headboard with a thud. “Fuck.” She had not thought of that at all, none of it, and was sure that he was exaggerating or being foolish that anyone would ever follow her otherwise, but she could recognize the implications of the rest. If she was seen to be a threat that could extend to others, those who were important to her. Lady Sansa came immediately to her mind. Would this make matters worse? “I did not consider it beyond the advantage my father might be in helping to temper her impulsiveness. She was grieving and she was alone. I know what that feels like. I thought it might ease things if she were not so alone as she believed, especially with so many recent losses, but… fuck.”

Jaime enjoyed that she was far too practical of nature to panic. He smirked at her. “You understand my feelings of apprehension now. I have tried very hard to ignore them, but I fear that my own history is both a blessing and a curse. I know the potential of what we could be facing, and I know that she could prove benign and quite well suited to her position… but I will not feel even a moment of security until we are well away from here, ensconced within Casterly Rock, with scorpions mounted high upon the walls.”

Her head rolled toward him and she searched his face with her eyes. “Is that why you have not been sleeping?”

The concern in her voice warmed him, but he did not want her to worry for him. “It is one reason. I am worried about Cersei too,” he admitted, “and I was missing you. I feared you might actually use Oathkeeper on me when I asked for your hand.”

“I have not entirely ruled it out.” She heaved a sigh at him. “You should not fear what has not yet come to be. We will give her no reasons to worry, but I will still have your child be a Lannister of Casterly Rock.” She watched him frown and shook her head. “My mind is set on it, do not fight me, Jaime.” Her eyes sparkled. “I would win. As I always do.” Brienne straightened where she sat and turned toward him. “It is practical and it is right. I cannot say how I will feel about the child once it is here, but it would be unkind to treat it differently, and that I will not have.”

Jaime sighed. “For want of a Septon I would wed you now, and wearing nothing else but that shirt,” he decided.

“Yes, and what a sight I would make,” she rolled her eyes at him, “with my ass hanging out and my legs on full display.”

“Is it not your duty as a bride to please your Lord Husband?” He grinned. “I can promise you, he would be most pleased with that sight.”
“Because he is both a fool and age has dulled his eyesight.” She leaned forward and kissed him.

“A fool I may be,” he agreed, “but I have been dreaming of those legs since Harrenhal. Do not scoff at me, Ser, I know of what I speak.” He reached down and curled his left arm beneath her knees to draw both her legs across his lap. “They are long enough to wrap around me twice, I think, and strong enough to break me in half, I am sure. I am a man of many weaknesses, and these are surely one.”

“You claim to be lucky and wonder how this is,” she shook her head at him, still not believing at times her own good fortunes, “but it is I who never thought to have one such as you.” She took his face in her hands and leaned forward to kiss him.

“Who is the fool now?” He pressed her backward into the feather mattress beneath them and leaned over her long body. “You are a goddess,” he said, “the Warrior cast from the heavens to walk among us, though we are none of us deserving.”

“The warrior?” She gaped at him. “Are you not capable of bending your foolish japes to the altar of the Maiden for a woman you would claim to want to wed?”

“I would.” He smirked, “except that you are most certainly not a maid, as I have done the deed myself, many times and in many ways, and I can attest to just how besmirched you truly are, Ser Brienne of Tarth. It is a miracle your father has not yet had my head, for I doubt even my brother would deny him, and once they’ve met you, even Ser Addam Marbrand and my cousin Daven shall decide they love you more than they love me.”

“Jaime!” She placed a hand against his chest and pushed him from her. She sat up, eyes wide and staring at him. “You have not been making japes about this in front of my father? Tell me you have not, or I swear to all the gods I will feed you to the Queen’s dragon myself.”

He flopped onto his back beside her with a loud sigh. “I knew that dragon would be my end eventually. Amusing that it would prove to be because of you and not as a result to riding toward it with a spear in hand.”

“You rode toward the queen’s dragon with a spear?” She had not heard that tale before. Brienne rolled her eyes at him and climbed from the bed again. “Why would you do something so idiotic?”

Jaime lifted his head and arched a brow at her. “Obviously, you damaged my head when you pushed me off that horse with my hands chained and my head hooded. I would never have done such a thing before meeting you. It is entirely your fault, so you have to wed me. Who else will care for a crippled and addled old man such as I?” He frowned. “What in all the hells are you doing?”

Brienne had pulled clothes from her bags that were clean enough for the evening. She would need to set Jory to finding her other things on the morrow, but what she had would do for another day. She glanced at him as she wet a cloth and set to cleaning the smell of him from her skin. “I am supping with my father this evening, and the hour grows late.” She could feel her cheeks flushing, “though how I shall face him now, I do not know.”

“Brienne.” He rolled from the bed and walked to her side. “I did not, truly. Your father isn’t stupid, and my feelings for you are quite obvious and embarrassing, according to all who know us, and I have been told that I am utterly pathetic, although I care not what they think.” He looped his right arm around her waist and pulled her into his body. Her back was warm against his chest. “He has worked it out for himself, I assure you, though I would not deny it if asked.” He rested his chin against her shoulder and stilled her hands with his left for a moment. “I would not deny you,” he said gently.
She leaned against him, for when he held her it was easy to believe that even one such as her, who was tall and broad, and stronger than most men, could feel secure and cared for in the arms of another. A smile was attempting to pull the corners of her lips upward. “Obvious, embarrassing, and pathetic is it?”

Jaime groaned and turned his face into her shoulder. “Woman, I was so nervous the very heights of my ability to seduce you were limited to announcing it’s bloody hot in here, what do you think?”

She snorted a laugh. “That you would have me to wife or no other because there is no other woman in all the world that would have such a fool.”

“I will be sure to thank all the gods for that small mercy, because there is none other that I want.” He turned his face into her neck and pressed his lips to the scars the bear had left behind. He felt her go stiff in his arms, if just for a moment, and knew her well enough to know her doubts. “Not even her,” he whispered. It was duty, and family, and long years of knowing nothing else that had kept him with Cersei for so long. He loved her, once, but his feelings had changed. He had changed. It was duty and honor that had taken him north, and when he saw Brienne again, when he heard the conviction in her voice when she spoke for him, he realized it was love that had drawn him there too. When duty and honor had drawn him away, it was her that he longed for. “I swear it,” he added, lips moving against her skin.

She turned in the circle of his arms. “So many vows,” she cupped the back of his head and drew his mouth to hers. “You swear and swear.”

“Only for you,” he teased her bottom lip and groaned when he heard a knock at the door. “I don’t think I like this new squire. She has the most unfortunate timing.”

“Brienne, I would speak with you now.”

The two of them jerked apart, as though doused with cold water at the sound of her father’s voice. “What is he doing here?” She hissed.

“I didn’t call for him.” Jaime’s eyes were wide. He looked down at himself. He was as naked as the day he was born. Jaime let his eyes wander up her form; she was hardly any better except for the shirt that was hanging from her torso. “I was right the first day. I am going to die.”

“I sent your squire for our supper,” Selwyn continued speaking through the closed door. “No doubt there will be enough for the Kingslayer too.”

“I will be out in a moment,” She called. “There should be wine. Make yourself comfortable.”

Brienne blinked. “Get dressed,” she whispered, and drew away from him to begin hastily doing that herself.

“In what?” Jaime stared at her. “My bloody clothes are out there,” he jerked his head in the direction of her sitting room.

Brienne grabbed a pair of her own trousers and shoved them at him. “Put something on,” she growled.

Jaime looked down at the bundle of wool in his arms. “A wife I can share clothes with. What a novel idea. Think of the gold we will save on tailoring.”

There was another knock at the door. “Shall I fetch the boy’s pants?”
“Which you shall no doubt spend well as my widow.” A shirt hit him in the face and he grinned at her. “You have to admit, it is rather amusing. We are both of us well and truly grown but you’re acting like a maid of fourteen whose father has just caught a boy in her bedchambers for the first time.”

“No.” She glared at him. “I am a woman of quite more than that whose father has caught a man in her bedchambers for the first time, and if you do not get yourself dressed in the next two minutes, I am not going to be a widow because I am going to kill you myself.” She finished jerking a pair of pants up her legs and walked resolutely away from him to continue lacing her shirt and making herself presentable.

Jaime rolled his eyes at her and began doing as he had been told. It was on the tip of his tongue to remind her that he would need more than two minutes, considering he only had the one hand, but he managed at a pace that kept her from glowering at him again. “Not yet even wed,” he grumbled, “and already she is taking the fun out of everything.”

“Piss off.” She combed her fingers through her hair and strode resolutely toward the door.

He joined her there, and stood behind her as she squared her shoulders in preparation for leaving the room. “You love me,” he reminded her.

“And every moment I wonder why that is,” she shot back. She took a breath and finally pulled the door open. He wasn’t far off the mark, she certainly felt like a maid of fourteen who had been caught with a boy for the first time.

That did not stop Brienne from lifting her chin as she walked out to face her father.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to thedistressedgoddess for your thoughts several comments ago. You’re absolutely right! It stayed with me, especially while I was finally writing J&B’s reunion. I could totally see him having a complete Jaime moment about it. I hope I captured the spirit of your thoughts correctly! As you said: “IT IS KNOWN!”
Brienne was prepared for many things when she left her bedchamber, but the expression on her father’s face was none of those things. She had seen him angry before, angry with her even, and there had been moments of worry, and amusement, or even disappointment when she was a child. She found his face to be a reflection of all of those things. Brienne decided she would be calm, even if she didn’t entirely feel that way. The truth was, she was a woman grown, and whatever her father thought about her relationship with Jaime, it could not change what was, what is, or what was going to be. It had been too long since she had needed her father’s approval for the decisions that she was making, though she would not deny there was a part of her that wanted that.

“Father.” She greeted him politely, but her head still tilted as she walked toward him. “I thought I would be coming to you?”

He almost laughed at the implication she was laying upon him. He was an uninvited guest. Selwyn was seated on one of the thickly cushioned sofas, a goblet of wine in his hand. “Brienne.” His eyes moved to the man that was trailing along behind her, attempting to look just as arrogant and uncaring as he usually did, and failing miserably. Selwyn’s lips pressed into a thin line to prevent the smirk from twisting at his mouth. “Kingslayer.”

Her eyes flashed at the old moniker. “Do not call him that in my presence,” Brienne warned, voice lilting toward a clipped tone. There was a lot of deference she would give her father, but not on this.

“Brienne.” Jaime touched her hand. When he drew her gaze, he shook his head. “The truth is out. It doesn’t mean what it did.” The fingertips of his left hand stroked the length of her palm before he drew his hand away. “Besides, your father and I have come to an understanding…” His gaze moved to the man seated before them. “He won’t kill me for killing to avenge Aerys, and I won’t slay anymore Targaryen monarchs. I’m calling it a win,” he added flippantly.

The line between her brows deepened. She scowled at him. “Is this amusing to you?”

Jaime met her gaze. “It truly is not.” It had been a quite difficult few weeks. His dreams were filled with memories and dark possibilities, and in all of them he was forced to make decisions that would haunt his waking moments.

Selwyn watched as the two of them seemed to have an entire conversation in the space of that single look. He saw several emotions pass between them, concern chief among them, but then he saw the acceptance that settled over the pair. When his daughter finally pulled away, his gaze tracked her to the table where she stopped to pour wine for the two of them. Selwyn pulled his eyes from her then and trained them back on Lannister. He was watching her too, but with her back turned, the man’s eyes were filled with pure adoration.

“Alright, Lannister. Let us get on with it. There is a question that I have been waiting too many weeks to have asked.” His eyes narrowed and he faced the pair with a stony expression. “Since I have found you at it, let’s have it done. I’ll not have her reputation ruined anymore than you’ve already done.”

He waited for Brienne to rejoin him before they both sat on the cushioned bench facing her father. Jaime scowled at the older man. So it was to be disapproval then. She deserved better than that. “Ask
the Northern army, the Dothraki, and the Unsullied what they think of her reputation. You’ll find it above reproach,” he bit out. Jaime placed the goblet of wine that Brienne had brought him on the low table in front of them. When he straightened again, his eyes hardened. Gone was the man who had spent long weeks pining for a woman. He was replaced with the Lord of Casterly Rock.

“It is not her prowess in battle that I am concerned about.” Selwyn sat forward and regarded the pair of them. “I trained her myself, with help from Evenfall’s master-at-arms, and she has exceeded even my own expectations.” His gaze fell upon his only living child. “Certainly you have surpassed those of any who would have doubted you, daughter, and while I am proud that you have managed to alter perception and tradition, there are some things our world is not yet ready to look beyond. I will not say that I have not found your suitor’s affections and moods to be amusing while you were absent from his side, but the fact remains, this behavior cannot be allowed to continue.”

Brienne had bristled at both his tone and the implication of his words. She had not cared what others thought of her, and beyond a few looks and whispered insults that were more directed at Jaime, they had not needed to concern themselves with the opinions of those around them while they were at Winterfell. The North truly was another world, she thought, or perhaps it was only that everyone there had appreciated the idea of survival, while in the South there were many who would never be able to imagine what those who had fought the dead had experienced on that dark night.

“Am I to be bartered then,” she asked stiffly, “like a prized mare?”

“You are to be the next Evenstar,” her father reminded her, with a look and a tone that admonished her own attitude. “I cannot have it whispered from Tarth to Barrowtown that you are the Kingslayer’s Whore.”

“Words are wind,” she shot back, “or was that not what you told me when the boys of Evenport laughed at my poorly formed face. Was it not what you said when Ronnet Connington left the rose at my feet? Surely, I seem to recall hearing it on the eve of a ball that I knew would be a disaster. Tell me, father, if words are wind, then why are you concerned what is being said now? I have been called far worse than that in my life, and some of those insults reached my ears in my own home.”

“This is different,” Selwyn told her. Surely he had tried to shield his child from the cruelties of others, but he was not always successful. He had thought, too, that she should be able to armor herself against their unkindness. “The future of Tarth is not dependent on the fit of a gown or the way you braid your hair. The people on that island depend on us for their safety and livelihood. The people of the Stormlands look to us for security. Sailors from Parchments to Rain House depend on us to guide their path when the storms come. When the Lords of the Reach argue with the Crown, smugglers shelter in our ports as they ferry goods back and forth for the sake of the smallfolk. All of that will be your responsibility one day, but what will become of Tarth or the shores of the Stormlands if pirates from Tyrosh or raiders from the Disputed Lands hear whispers that Evenfall has grown weak with its new Lady and the company she keeps?”

“Then they will feel pitch, and stone, and arrow,” Brienne said firmly, “as they always have.” Her brow furrowed. “Why is it when the Lord of Evenfall takes a new whore every year, it is not whispered about on the wharfs of White Harbor, but I am to be sold like livestock to protect the reputation of Tarth for doing far less.”

His violet eyes flashed with annoyance at her impertinence, but Selwyn could not deny the truth in her claims. He had not been as discreet as he should have been, surely, but it was not his actions that were in question. “The world was not built to care about the freedoms of women, that is not a wrong that I can correct. Time and tradition will have to take care of that with the generations that come after us, and certainly it is better than it was. Are you not a Knight of the Seven Kingdoms? Did I not
let you train with sword, and arrow, and fists when it became evident that you would not do otherwise? I permitted you to command men, on our shores and on our ships, and when banners were called, you took a host to answer it in my name. You have fought men and monsters, and accomplished more than I could have imagined.” His gaze softened for a moment. “I am proud of you,” he told her, “do not think otherwise, but do not also look to me, my girl, to correct the crimes of society against your sex; I have done what I can. My duty now is to our home, our House, and our people.”

The pair stared at each other for several terse moments. Jaime could see the storm brewing in her eyes. She was tense and balking at the idea of having the freedom she had enjoyed for so long corralled behind the walls of her father’s command. Her hands were clasped tightly in her lap. Jaime reached out and placed his left hand over both of them. His fingers curled around them and squeezed gently.

“Lady Brienne will bring one hundred and fifty archers with her to Casterly Rock,” he stated, speaking as the head of his own House and hoping she would trust him to get this done quickly so that they could move past it. He could have seen it done long before she arrived, but he had waited, because he knew she would have her own thoughts on the matter, and she deserved to have them known. “They will train and fight with my own men, and teach the west the use of the heavy bow. In return,” he continued, “Tarth will have grain and livestock from the Westerlands. I have only seen your island from the afar, but it did not look to have much grazing lands, goats and sheep I think. Are the marble mines still functional?”

“Trade has declined in recent years, there is not much cause for marble when there is war. Now that winter is upon us, I do not foresee that changing.” But he had men that would need to work for the coin to feed their families. “You have mines that you have reopened recently?”

“You will send your miners west,” Jaime nodded, “those that have been sent home for lack of work. We will have use of them until the spring comes.” Much of the rebuilding would begin then, and the men would be needed back on their island. He would not pay gold for her, he would not insult her that way, and nor would he talk of heirs for he was not his father. “The mills in Rainwood are said to produce the strongest wood in the Kingdoms.”

“They do.” Selwyn tilted his head, considering. “The lumber of the Stormlands has been used to build Keeps and ships. We regularly send shipments to Dorne and the Arbor.”

“You’ll add Lannisport, we have much rebuilding to do in the West. Likewise, House Lannister will pay for the shipment of lumber north, to the Riverlands, which we will coordinate with Lord Tully upon his arrival.” That would not immediately benefit Tarth, but it would provide further alliance between the West and the Stormlands. “I will send a garrison of men to Storm’s End with Lord Gendry, to assist in the restoration efforts.” He glanced to his left and the woman beside him. Though she did not look at him, he saw her nod. It was a fair exchange, and no less than he would have given anyway, even without her hand. Her fingers twitched against his and he turned his attention back to her father. “In return, Lady Brienne will be Lady of Casterly Rock and Commander of the Western Armies.” He felt a small jolt in her at the last one, but whom else would he put in command of his armies alongside himself? She did not let her surprise show, however, and he felt a small smile tug at the corner of his mouth. “Are we in agreement, my Lord?”

Selwyn watched his daughter’s stone-faced expression. She blinked at him, but did not give any other response at their negotiation. It was a far more generous exchange than had been offered for her in the past, and he knew she would know that. Circumstances had changed, however, since those days long ago. “We are,” he stated simply. “I presume we also want this to happen without much
more delay?”

It was then that Brienne moved. Her head turned and she met Jaime’s gaze. His brow arched at her and she watched the crinkle of his eyes at the corner. “This eve might be a little too presumptuous,” she warned him.

“Then you should have trained your new squire better,” he quipped. “Podrick would never have allowed your Lord Father into the chamber while my breeches were strewn across the floor.”

“You must let this go,” she admonished gently. “Podrick is a squire no more, and no amount of wishing otherwise will change that.” Her head tilted. “I think the more crucial obstacle before us is the lack of sept.”

“There is one in the keep,” he told her, “it will suffice. No, the most pressing obstacle is the boxing my ears will take when next I see my Aunt Genna. I’ll not wait the time it will take her to arrive from Casterly Rock,” he decided. “A sennight should be sufficient time for arrangements to be made. I would expect the rest of the Stark party to have arrived by then.”

“A sennight then.” She nodded before turning her attention back to her father. “Will that suffice to allay your concerns about my reputation?”

She was terse, wounded by the blow he cast at her to the independence she had enjoyed. In the space of an afternoon Selwyn had managed to snap her back from sworn sword to a great House to daughter and heir with duties and responsibilities to her own House and family. She would never turn her back on that duty, he knew, but it was done now and they can put it behind them.

“It will.” Selwyn smirked. “Do not scowl at me, daughter. Another father might have reacted quite differently.”

Another father might not have let her leave with his blessing when he realized that he could not keep her on their small island. She might have been married off long ago, or condemned to a life as a septa or silent sister. Brienne had always known how fortunate she was, but that did not prevent the tense set of her shoulders or the way she had continued to glower at the man before her. “There should be a better way.”

“There will be one day, I am sure.” Selwyn rose then and skirted around the table to bend and press a kiss to the top of his daughter’s head. “You will have better options for your daughters, but at least I will see mine happy before my time in this life is done. Though it is not every father that will see his daughter given command of her Lord Husband’s army as a price of their betrothal.”

“That is unexpected.” Brienne looked at the man beside her as her father moved away again. He was smirking at her and looking entirely too pleased with himself. “Do you think it is wise?”

“Have you ever known me to be wise?” Jaime gave her hands a squeeze again before withdrawing his back to his side “I would not change you. The Westerlands will know their Lady is both wife and knight.” The warrior brought down from the heavens to walk among them, he thought again.

Selwyn moved to the table and topped off his goblet of wine. “I met your Lady Sansa. Lovely young woman.” He cast a look at his daughter from the corner of his eye. “Her sister arranged the introduction.”

There was an admonishment there that Jaime waved off before she could take it to heart. “Arya would have it no other way. She’s a protective little she-wolf, and Sansa already knows everyone
“A fair point,” Selwyn nodded. He reclaimed his seat with a small smile. “She isn’t at all what I expected. Jon is a rather brooding sort of fellow and Arya,” he chuckled, “much like you were at that age, I think, only she is more likely to stab the boys than break their noses.”

“You wouldn’t let me have a blade until you’d taught me to use it properly,” Brienne quipped, “what else was I supposed to do?”

“Exactly how many of the boys on that island did you beat into the dust?” Jaime tilted his head at her. There was amusement blazing in his green eyes. He could just imagine her, little Brienne, already taller than everyone around her and filled with righteous indignation at the japes of young boys who were wishing they were men.

Her eyes crinkled at the corners while her lips pursed. She met his gaze and shrugged. “All of them.” She watched the grin spread across his face, the slow curl of his lips and the way his eyes filled with pride. “Then I went and started on the ones in Renly’s camp.”

“Bloody northmen,” Jaime huffed, “by the time you made it to the Riverlands, I had been a year in a cage.” He sighed. He would always wonder how they might have fared with that sword fight if he had been his true self, but then he also feared what might be lost to them now if their past were not as it was. “The tale of how you bested Loras will remain my favorite,” he added, if a bit wistfully.

Brienne rolled her eyes at him. “Has it never occurred to you that the best way to have avoided spending a year in a cage would have been to not wage war against the northmen to begin with?”

“Must you be logical when I’m trying to sulk?” He shook his head at her. “I’ve given you my army wench, what else am I to do?”

“Learn how to sew,” she told him, and tried to remember a time when she wasn’t so amused by his exasperating manner.

“Wouldn’t that be an interesting sight? Perhaps I shall ask Lady Sansa to show me.” His eyes gleamed at her. It didn’t matter if they were in the training yard or not, he so enjoyed their sparring. “Think she would show me to embroider lions so that I might make handkerchiefs for my new bride?”

“I think I’ve just spent a fortnight showing her how to wield a dagger, Ser,” her eyes were sparkling pools of purest blue. “She is more like to gift me with a lion pelt, but do approach her if you feel you must.”

“Which is why I shall take Ser Podrick to protect me,” he declared. Jaime was tempted to kiss her trembling lips, and would have were her father not present.

She scoffed at him. “You truly think he would?”

“Now you’re just being mean.” He made a face at her. “In front of your father, no less, whatever will he think of us?”

“Had I known you’d prove so comical, I might have insisted upon this match long ago.” Selwyn shook his head at the pair of them. He’d been warned, but he hadn’t considered Ser Bronn to be a reliable source of information. “I wonder what your father would have paid me to see you so properly brought to heel?”

While Brienne scowled at her father, Jaime laughed. “Your very own goldmine underneath The
Rock, I’m sure. Speaking of my wayward family,” he paused when the door opened, held by one of Lord Selwyn’s ever-present men-at-arms, and Lady Jorelle reappeared. The squire led two kitchen maids through the chamber to set the table for supper. Jaime drew his eyes away from them when he decided his future goodfather’s guards had things well in hand. It was a habit from his long years in the Kingsguard that he was not sure he would ever be free of. His attention shifted back to Brienne with only barely a beat spared. “You will meet my cousin Daven tomorrow,” he continued, “and where he is, Ser Addam Marbrand and Ser Lyle Crakehall are sure to be. We’ll turn over any arrangements that need to be made to Daven, including any ravens that need to be sent to my Aunt Genna.” He smirked. His aunt was sure to have his hide when next he saw her, especially if he robbed her of a wedding, but he intended the deed to be done before Brienne finally came to her senses. “Addam and Lyle will want to spar with you. They believe not a thing I’ve told them. They are my oldest friends, do feel free to bruise them, a lot.”

Her brows drew together in concern. She suddenly felt very skeptical about that meeting. She was tempted to chew on her bottom lip, but her father had always hated when she did that. Brienne twisted her fingers together instead. “What have you been telling them?”

He lifted a shoulder at her in response. “Only that you’re better with a sword than I ever was,” he said easily.

“Jaime!” Her cheeks immediately flushed. “You have not.” When he only grinned at her, she groaned. “Why would you tell them such a thing?”

“Because it’s true.” He frowned at her. “Surely you know that.” She had bested him, The Hound, an army of the dead, and how many others? She could not honestly believe herself any less skilled, could she?

“Are you mad?” Brienne thought she might throttle him, her father’s presence be damned. “You were knighted at fifteen by Ser Arthur Dayne on the field of battle,” she said slowly, as though he might have lost all his wits.

“Yes, and you were knighted by me at Winterfell on the eve of battle, what of it? Do you honestly think I give away priceless swords and knighthoods because I’m a generous sort?” Jaime snorted at her. “You bested Ser Loras Tyrell, who was one of the best of his generation, and who had recently bested me at a tourney. Do we need to talk about the bear?”

“You saved me from the bear,” she reminded him. Brienne rose from the couch and walked toward the table. “I know you haven’t forgotten that fact because you like to tell anyone who is willing to listen.”

“And anyone else would have perished in a minute.” Jaime followed her, a scowl darkening his brow. “You bested The Hound, and that is no easy feat. I’ve never fought the man, would you like to know why? Because I knew I couldn’t win. I was good,” he admitted, “I was very good, actually, and what made me so good was knowing how to pick my battles. You won your way onto Renly’s Kingsguard, I was a hostage to Aerys. Those are two very different circumstances, love.”

“If the man who taught you how to use that sword might get a word in,” Selwyn cast a look at them from over his shoulder before he rose from where he was seated. “Between King’s Landing and Storm’s End, who do you think I trained with?” He shook his head at her and let the implication hang between them, even a royal bastard would have been trained by only the very best. “Listen to the boy, you always had the talent for it, my girl, where you differed from me is that I didn’t have the heart.” He could wield a sword and wield it well, but he had become one with his island, and the bow was where his passion lay.
Brienne sighed, exasperated with both of them. “I will concede the matter if it will make you both happy, but I am not so arrogant as to think I can defeat the likes of the Strongboar. Ser Lyle’s reputation is well known.”

“When you’re done with him, he will write the songs himself.” Jaime lay his left hand over his chest, “that I can surely promise you. No doubt you father will have an opposing betrothal request by sunset the same day, and I will be forced to pay Ser Bronn to deal with him, though despite having been beaten in the training yard by Arya, he still thinks I owe him a castle.”

Her lips twisted in disgust. “Ser Bronn is here?” She looked between the two men. “And you’re associating with him again? Now I know you’ve lost your mind.” She huffed. “He tried to kill you, Jaime.”

“Yes,” he grinned at her, “and I thought the Lady of Casterly Rock might like to settle Bronn’s debt on behalf of our House.” He rocked back on his heels. “What say you?”

Her eyes narrowed for a moment and then she nodded. “Consider it done.”

Jory drew their attention before they could begin bickering again. She was trying not to look on the Kingslayer with quite so much disdain while her Lady-Ser’s father was present, but it was difficult. “Will you be needing anything else, Ser?”

“No, Jory,” Brienne nodded to her. “Please, go and find your own supper and then the evening is yours. We will resume our usual training schedule in the morning after I have met with Lady Sansa.”

“Ser,” she nodded before turning. “My Lord,” for Selwyn she provided a curtsy. Jaime she barely acknowledged at all.

Jaime fought the urge to grin as she left. Once the door had closed behind her, he rolled his eyes toward Brienne. “May I please be there when you tell her where she will be living for the remainder of her time with you?”

“You may not.” Brienne sighed. The girl was highborn, so she would not censure her in front of the other two, but she would speak to her on the morrow. “I will deal with my squire, you deal with yours. If such a creature exists.”

“Two of them, actually.” He frowned. “Although they’re never around. That could be a problem. I think Podrick has spoiled me,” he admitted. “It was only the single turn of a moon and I am ruined for all squires.”

Selwyn shook his head. “If I had known he would be so much maintenance, my girl, I would have negotiated a little longer.”

Brienne blinked at him and then said, with as little emotion as possible, “he’s a Lannister.”

Her father’s grin was hawkish as he replied, “Just remember, you chose this one, not I.”

She groaned when the two men grinned at one another. She was reminded that they’d had weeks together before she arrived. She almost wondered if the evening had been planned in advance. Not that it truly mattered, she would not have changed her mind, but now that the two of them had what they wanted, both men would end up being completely insufferable. She wondered, truly, if it was it too late to return to Winterfell.

-TBC-
Chapter End Notes

Thank you again, so so much, to everyone who has commented or left Kudos. You are all the very best!
“I apologize for the short notice of the invitation,” Daenerys began carefully, “but I thought we could speak, away from the prying eyes of others.”

“Your Grace,” Brienne nodded as she sat on one of the ornate cushioned chairs on the Queen’s balcony. It was a cold day and there was the threat of rain on the horizon, but braziers had been lit so that they could still enjoy the view of the bay and the fresh, salt tinged air.

If she was at all anxious about being alone with the Queen in the other woman’s solar, Brienne attempted not to show it. She did not know the woman well, or at all truly, but she had witnessed how formidable she could be, both with her dragons and without. It did not help that the last time she had spoken with a sovereign in the capital it had not gone well.

“You love him.”

It had haunted her, long after she left King’s Landing, the words as well as the dangerous warning in the other woman’s eyes. At least then she had an escape from uncomfortable truths, and Cersei was where she could no longer hurt anyone, least of all her twin.

Brienne’s thoughts now were centered on another Queen who was watching her with a piercing gaze. Odd, that the same man should be the specter between them. Whatever truths were known now, she would not forget the bitter rage in the Queen’s eyes when she had spoken in defense of Jaime at Winterfell. She had wanted his head, or she had wanted him to burn was more probable. Brienne could remember the way her own chest had clenched with worry, and how her stomach had twisted when she realized she may have to watch him die for the sake of the promise she had forced upon him.

Seated before that same Queen now, no matter the truths that had been revealed to them, she could not say that she felt anymore secure in Jaime’s continued good health. It was not only the Queen’s intentions that worried her. He did have a way of pushing people to the very end of their patience.

“I spoke to your father before your arrival, he mentioned that there could be an alliance created between the Stormlands and the West.” The Queen offered wine, although it was politely declined. “I understand the necessity of marriages to form alliances, but I will not force them upon the nobles of my court, and certainly not upon those of my… relation,” she faltered, trying to find a proper word that was neither awkward nor overly familiar.

Brienne smiled tightly. “Yes,” she stated, “my father was quite adamant that we have the agreement in place. There is no cause for concern,” she shifted in her seat and wished she had worn armor for this meeting, rather than a wool tunic and breeches. She thought she might have been more comfortable. “I have agreed to the betrothal. I will wed Lord Lannister in a sennight. The agreements will be posted in the next day, I am certain.” Neither her father nor Jaime had wanted to tarry over it.

“I had not thought you the sentimental sort when you defended him to me previously,” Daenerys admitted. “I confess I believed you were doing so on behalf of Lady Sansa, who appeared determined to disagree with all my recommendations.”
A frown drew her brows together. “I would not,” Brienne said tersely, feeling affronted at the thought of it. “Nor do I think Lady Sansa would have allowed blind obstinacy to guide her decisions where the safety of her people and her family were concerned.” Her blue eyes glinted like steel as she met the Queen’s gaze. “Further, Lady Sansa would not have asked me to lie on her behalf, or to speak of matters I did not believe in. If you have not seen, by now, the truth of my words at Winterfell then you will not see them.” She waited only half a beat before adding an obligatory, “Your Grace.”

Daenerys’s eyes widened slightly in surprise before she schooled her features so that she looked carefully impassive. “You know your Lady well,” she remarked, “you played to her sense of honor and sympathies when you defended Lord Lannister at Winterfell. Why did you not simply reveal the truth about why he killed my father? I can only assume that you already knew it. If you did not, then you were a fool to defend such a man to me, and if you did, you can understand why I might question where your loyalties lie.”

“My loyalties lie with the side of what is right, Your Grace.” Brienne’s chin lifted as she stared down at the smaller woman. The Queen might have been formidable, perhaps even threatening in her own way, but she would not have her honor questioned by someone who knew nothing of her. “Yes, since you have now heard the story, I was aware the facts regarding the night King Aerys died. It was not my story to tell. I do not reveal the secrets that are entrusted to me.” Her jaw clenched. “However, had you insisted upon blind justice I would have beseeched Jaime to reveal the facts himself.”

The Queen tilted her head, even as a single brow rose in contemplation. “Do you believe that he would have?” She was trying to keep emotion out of her tone, but the other woman was quite stubborn, and this was not a subject that she was especially fond of discussing. She did not appreciate, either, having her sense of justice questioned. Her need to right the wrongs for others, that they could not right themselves had always been something that she was proud of.

“Probably not,” Brienne sighed. “I am not even certain that I know why he told me, except that he was feverish, pained, and in desperate need of an ally at the time.” He had trusted her, more than anyone, with that secret, and that revealed more of him than he probably had thought it would. Brienne shook her head, frustrated with the turn this meeting had taken. “As a member of the Kingsguard, Ser Jaime took an oath to guard your father’s secrets. That did not stop with his death. While others may have suspected, I believe I am the only person that he has ever told. There are many oaths that we are asked to uphold throughout our lives, as knights, and sons, and daughters, Lords, Ladies, or even as Kings and Queens. Often we find that to protect the innocent we must defy our Lords, or even our Kings.”

“My father was not a good man, I know this.” Daenerys gave a small shrug; it was a fact she could not deny. “My brother, Viserys, was not a good man either, not really. I still feel affection for him, despite the terrible things he did, because there were moments when he was good to me. Rhaegar was a complicated man, I am told. He had moments of profound goodness, and yet he was also troubled and brooding, and in the end he risked a war for the love of a woman who was not his. He left his wife and his children for the sake of that love, and his family was destroyed as a consequence. I am not them,” she stated, feeling more confident in that now that she knew more of them.

Brienne’s head tilted slightly in acknowledgement. “As you say, Your Grace.”

She almost smiled at that. Daenerys clasped her hands in her lap. “Let us speak frankly, Ser Brienne.”
“I know of no other way,” the older woman replied, if a bit stiffly.

The Queen straightened in her seat. “While he has abdicated before the Small Council, and we have named him Lord Protector of the Seven Kingdoms, Lord Stark plans to formally abdicate before the Court at my Coronation. He will have it known to the realm that the throne is not something that he wants, seeks, or intends to have.” A small smile did curve her lips then. “He would protect his people, but he does not wish to rule them.”

“That is his way,” Brienne said plainly. “He was proclaimed King in the North, it was not a position that he ever sought. He accepted for the sake of his people, because he knew the threat that we were facing with the Night King and his armies.” She blinked once. “What does this have to do with me?” Jaime’s words were ringing clearly through her mind and she could feel the tightening in her stomach as worry settled inside her.

“I think you know, Cousin.” The Queen allowed a small, knowing smile. “No one’s rule is guaranteed. Jon is Rhaegar’s heir. Although there is some question as to whether my father might have disowned him or not, the fact remains that when it came time to fight for his throne, it was his eldest son that my father called upon to lead his armies. There is no full accounting, and so I must considered the varied stories that I have heard from my brother, Viserys, Lord Tyron, Lord Varys, Lord Jaime and even your father to be rumor. There are some common elements within each one, but…” She held her hands aloft in front of her, palms turned toward the heavens, “which is the truth? Lord Bran could tell us, but would history trust his Greensight? Jon has stated that his brother is not a fortuneteller and so we cannot use his gifts to our own ends, and I agree with him. In the absence of hard fact I have chosen to rely upon what is known, and those are the laws of this land. In Westeros, though it is quite often unfortunate and frustrating for ones such as you or I, the rights of inheritance are often bestowed upon the male heirs. If your father were a lesser man, more uncaring and arrogant, he could by right of law name a male cousin as his heir, now that such exists. He has not, and he will not. He has chosen you as his only heir, but there are others who were not as lucky. I am told that even while his eldest son was a member of the Kingsguard, and unable to inherit, Lord Tywin would not name his daughter nor his youngest son as heir to Casterly Rock, he would have preferred it pass to one of his brother’s sons, or even Ser Daven.”

“So I have heard. I did not meet him, formally, but he was not a kind man,” Brienne stated. “I do not think that it is Tywin Lannister that you wish to speak of.” Her eyes narrowed in understanding. “Lord Jon does have the stronger claim to the throne, that is true, which is why he will abdicate publicly. In the absence of a male heir, you are next in line, but you are a Targaryen and this land has much to fear of you based upon past experiences. You have not yet proved yourself to those who did not fight with us in the North or here with you in the capital.” She shook her head and heaved an exasperated sigh. Political maneuverings were not her strong suit, as she simply did not care for them. “The only interest that you have in my betrothal is the advantage that it gives a possible rival in the Westerlands. My relationship with the Stark family provides an alliance with the North, and you have made my father Lord Paramount of the Stormlands. When I swear fealty, I will mean it. I take my oaths very seriously, Your Grace. You have no cause for concern. I do not aspire for anything more than I have already obtained.”

“I have no cause for concern because I intend to name you my heir.” Daenerys replied. Her lips curved into a fully smile when she saw the shock her statement had rendered in the other woman. “Though I do not wish it to be publically, or formally, known, I have reason to believe that I cannot bear children. There are some who have told me that I should not believe the source of that information, and part of me wants to believe they speak true, but I will have peace in the Seven Kingdoms. Lord Tyron told me once that I should think of succession, and I arrogantly believed that I needed to have the throne first. The Game of Thrones is far more complicated than I knew at that time. This land has seen kings and queens rise and fall, with and without heirs, but most of the tumult
has come from those without. I cannot have that.” Daenerys stopped talking when she realized the woman before her had not moved, and she was certain she had not even blinked since her earlier statement. “Perhaps now would be a good time to reconsider the wine?”

Brienne jolted suddenly, and nodded once, brusquely as she rose to fetch it herself. “Yes. I think so.” She needed to move, perhaps even run, though all she allowed herself was the few strides that took her to the side table just inside the balcony doors. Her fingers felt almost numb as she poured the wine, and she grimaced as some sloshed over the rim of one of the goblets. She drew a breath, despite the sudden thudding of her chest. Was this a trap? If she misspoke now, how many others would be in danger for her ignorance? How many were already in danger? Brienne frowned as she walked back to the table. “Why me?”

Her eyes followed the much larger woman as she finally sat and, without waiting for a response, drained most of her wine. There was almost no social grace about her at all, and somehow, Daenerys found that refreshing. She was not like her betrothed, who was all arrogance and false courtesies. Nor was she anything like Tyrion, who hid his thoughts and true intentions behind wit and cleverness. Lady Sansa chose to be cold and aloof, while Jon was brooding and silent. She appreciated the honesty, the frankness of it. It reminded her of Lady Olenna, who had said she was too old and had lost too much to care for grace and courtesy and horseshit. It reminded her of Yara Greyjoy, who was wild and a bit crude, but just as forthright and loyal. The sting of Varys’s betrayal was still too fresh, and every day she was reminded of the losses of Missandei and Jorah, both whom she knew would have been honest with her in their gentle and caring ways.

“Everyone has divided loyalties,” Daenerys said. “Even Jon, who I know cares deeply for me must weigh his loyalty and care for me against what he feels for his family and his people. Tyrion, whom I am almost sure would never betray me is also pulled between his service to me and that of his family. He grieves the loss of his sister. He believed her; despite the many things she has done throughout his life to engender distrust and hate. She would kill him as soon as look at him, but she is his sister, and there is a part of him that cannot help but love her. I have had only a few who were mine, and mine alone, and I have lost most of them. I have known loneliness and despair, triumph and loss. I do not ask for blind loyalty, Ser Brienne. I would rather be told the truth than given false courtesies by those who would sooner turn to my enemies than tell me how I might better serve our people. If I name you as my heir, I believe that will allay some concerns, and it will certainly stop those who might choose to use you to subvert my rule.”

“Your Grace, I do not mean to offend, but if it is truth that you ask for, then I must confess that I believe the earlier concerns were not misplaced. You are mad.” Brienne stared at her, horrified both at what she had heard and what she had said. There was nothing for it, however, but to continue on and state her meaning and intentions. “I am not meant to rule, and whether I wanted to or not will not change that simple fact. Nor will it stop anyone who wants to depose you from finding a way to do that, whether they have my assistance in the endeavor or not. I can appreciate that you are attempting to strengthen the peace we are building by strengthening your own rule, but there is no one at all who would believe that you would choose an heir who will be wed to your enemy.” She scowled, even as she spoke as truthfully and earnestly as she thought was needed. “Jaime’s cause was noble, but the deed no less horrific in the killing of your father. His family had their part in the destruction of yours, and I am not blind to his faults or mistakes. There is no trust between you, and I do not think there ever shall be, so why then would you put him, or a child of his, on or near the throne you have lost so much to obtain?”

“Because no one would expect it of me,” Daenerys said plainly. Her eyes crinkled when she smiled. “Even if we wed, Jon will not take the throne if I am lost. I know that. He would sooner return north and live out the rest of his days at Winterfell or the Wall. There may yet be a child for us, and this is all moot, or perhaps we are not meant to be and I shall wed another. I cannot predict the future, but I
believe that I am beginning to understand the politics of this strange place. We are connected, and through you, I will have alliances with several of the kingdoms. If I name you my heir that will win me their loyalty, on paper if nothing more, at least until I have proven myself; I mean to rule fairly, and justly, and to make this world a better place than I found it when I arrived. I would like the heads of the Great Houses to help me in that, but since I will not be a Queen of the ashes, I must win them to my side. Lady Olenna Tyrell believed that I should make the people fear me; else they would never obey me.”

“Yes,” Brienne continued to watch her warily. “I knew the lady. She was… quite forthright with her opinions. She spoke truly of all manner of things. She was not fond of the Lannisters, and Jaime tells me that it was she who poisoned Joffrey. She would have let Lord Tyrion and Lady Sansa take the blame, if it meant protecting her granddaughter. She could be ruthless, when it was necessary. I do not agree with her methods, but I understand them.”

“Hm. Indeed. She called the nobles and smallfolk children, and that is how I shall think of them. In Yunkai I was called Mhysa. It means mother.” Daenerys lifted her goblet and sipped from it. “I am also a dragon, and I shall be a dragon. Just as Jon is a wolf, and Lord Lannister is a lion. I do not know what you are, and I am not sure that you know either.” Daenerys tilted her head in genuine curiosity. “Your father tells me that he is the Evenstar, the light in the east, guarding and guiding and ever present and true.”

“And I am his heir,” she said slowly, as realization began to push past the fog of surprise in her mind. “Ours is a small island, and our presence is rarely remembered, except when we have been needed to protect the shores of the Stormlands, to guide sailors through the worst storms, or provide safe harbor to those with need. So you will ask that of me now?”

“In the North you will have House Stark, and I believe that Lady Sansa will hold sway over Lord Tully in the Riverlands. I am told by both your future husband and his brother that she is her mother’s daughter and the people will follow her more readily than they would the man who turned on his uncle, the Blackfish, and gave up his home, lands, and armies. I am not sure that I agree with the sentiment, but I do understand it. The people who have been most impacted by the wars of this land will not be so forgiving of those they feel should have protected them.” Daenerys stood and paced around the table to walk to the stone parapet. From there she could see the Bay and the ever-darkening clouds of a building winter storm. The temperature had dropped, but the chill did not bother her. “In the East you will have your father and the Stormlands. I do not know this Lord Arryn who rules in the Vale, but I am told that he is also a Tully, through his mother, and so I expect he would follow your Lady’s lead. In the West,” she leaned against the low stone wall and folded her hands in front of her, “you will have your husband and his armies. I could fight House Lannister, and we could destroy each other. I could use my dragon, and people would die, people would fear me. I could fight House Stark, but I would lose Jon, and much of my army besides. I could even fight your father, but what is the point? You would bring the West, and Lady Sansa would bring you the North, and the result would all be the same. There would be ashes where there should be homes, corpses where there should be children, and people would fear me, they would obey me, and I would be my father.”

“And so to remove the threat, you would gain my loyalty.” Brienne stood, slowly, and walked to the parapet to join her. She laid her hands against the cool stone and turned her eyes to the storm. She had watched any number of storms like this one from the balcony of her rooms at Evenfall Hall; they would build and darken, and then blow across her island with the fury of the gods. Waves would churn and crash while lightning lit the sky and thunder rattled the walls. “What does Lord Tyrion say of this plan?”

“He does not know.” Daenerys let her head turn and watched the other woman. When they stood
together, as they did now, she realized just how formidable she was. “I did not ask his opinion, as I said, his loyalties are divided. He would argue against it, not as my advisor, but as a beloved brother. I cannot imagine that Lord Lannister will be at all pleased with the choice.”

“No,” she breathed. “If I agree, he will think that we have both lost our senses. He will be loyal to the crown, his people, and the realm, but that will not allay his concerns.”

“He fears me.” Daenerys had seen that in his eyes, but Tyrion had confirmed it for her. “His brother believes he was marked by his time serving my father, and not all scars can be seen.” She turned to her face to the shifting winds that were blowing in from the Bay. “It is why I have allowed his insolence. He wields it as others might a shield, and yet… when I faced his army some months ago, his fear of me did not stop him from taking up a spear and riding toward a fully grown dragon with intent to slay us both.”

Brienne closed her eyes against the image that conjured. “He truly is a fool,” she whispered. He would have thought himself heroic, and she wondered if she would ever have known how he died. The thought made her stomach twist painfully. “I do not want this,” she said thickly.

“Neither did I, once.” Daenerys slanted a look at her. “There was a time when all I wanted was to go home.” A small, wistful look softened her face. “I do not even know where that was, somewhere in Braavos. Not here, in a land I had never seen before, where Kings and nobles conspired to see me dead in my crib. There was a place and I could not find it if I tried. It had a red door, and there was a lemon tree outside my window. I close my eyes and I can almost see it.” She smiled sadly. “I could plant a thousand lemon trees here if I wanted to, but it would not be my home. It is my duty, and that is something that I think you understand. I have sworn oaths of my own, Ser Brienne, and I want to see them through.”

She could already hear Jaime railing at her, but Brienne sighed. Yes, duty and oaths was something she could understand quite well. “When would you announce it?”

“After the coronation. I will present it to my Small Council and the proper documents will be drawn up and witnessed. I would prefer we keep this between us until then, but I understand if you feel compelled to tell your betrothed.” Daenerys looked up at her, seeming almost hopeful. “It is peace that I want, truly. Will you help me?”

Brienne almost groaned when she looked at her and saw the girl, and not the Queen. “After the coronation we will put the idea to the Small Council, if they agree, then yes… I will help you.” She arched a brow at the smaller, younger woman. “Until you have a child to inherit your throne or another heir proves to be a better choice. Those are my conditions.”

Daenerys pressed her lips to keep from smiling. “And of your betrothed?”

She did not like keeping secrets. An omission was still a lie as far as Brienne was concerned, but she wondered how many times Jaime had kept the truth from her over the years, either to preserve her safety or her sanity. Or simply because it was easier. Brienne shook her head. She would not do that, but it was better to keep the knowledge to herself, for now. “After the coronation,” she decided, “before we speak with the rest of the Council. He will not appreciate the secret, but he does understand duty.” It had the added benefit of preventing him from doing anything foolish until then and besides, she reminded herself that the Queen had stated no more than he had. It was odd to her, that the girl who was once reviled for her plain, ugly features and broad, mannish body was now the most sought after ally. Brienne was certain that she would never understand politics. She would simply be brave, and just, serve those who were worthy, and protect those that required it. She could do no more, and she would do no less.
“I agree to your terms.” Daenerys smiled at her. “Thank you, Cousin.” She shook her head because the word still sounded awkward and foreign on her tongue. “I have had no family most of my life, and now they are practically falling out of the woodwork!”

“A state of being that I understand quite well,” Brienne admitted. “I do not remember much about my mother, or the babes that died with her. I remember a little about my brother, and I can recall what it felt like to lose him. For most of my life, though, it has been my father and myself, until I left the island. For years I wished my father would take another wife, that he might wed one of the women who frequented his company.” She shifted uncomfortably where she stood before glancing at the other woman. It was not common that she would reveal so much of herself, and certainly not to one she did not yet know or trust. “He deserved a better heir than the one he had, or so I once thought. When I finally understood why he insisted I be his heir, I was hundreds of leagues from my home and could not say when I would see it again.”

“Your father told me that it was safer for you to leave,” Daenerys said softly. “Though he also said he did not think he could have kept you there if he had tried.”

“I left Tarth to answer my King’s call, and I still think Renly would have been a better king than Stannis,” her lip curled in disgust and hatred, “and he was certainly better than Joffrey or Cersei, but I was blinded to his faults by my own infatuation. I couldn’t save him because I didn’t know the depths of darkness a man would seek in his pursuit of power. I was blind to many things back then. The world was black and white and my head was filled with songs and stories. I think many of us start out with the best of intentions, and it is only later that we understand what those intentions wrought.” Her gaze drifted and a small, sad smile curved her lips. “We were knights of summer once, all of us who sought glory and honor.” She could hear Lady Catelyn’s words in her mind, even as she spoke them. “But winter has come, and we shall never see those days again. Life is not as simple as good or bad, and neither are our choices. We do what we must to survive and to protect those who depend on us, and we hope we do it with honor and bravery. That is all that any of us can aspire to, even a mother of dragons.”

“We see the world as we want to see it, as we see ourselves. It is those like you and Tyrion who see the truth of it. When people look at Tyrion they see a small man,” Daenerys explained, “because they are themselves very small. They see their own shortcomings, and they dismiss wisdom and cleverness. When they look at you they must see the reflections of their own selves.” Her head tilted and her lips pursed. “Ser Jorah was confused about your friendship with Lord Jaime. He said that here was a man that had bedded one of the most beautiful women in Westeros, and yet he had left her, but when he looked at you it was like seeing a man who had spent too long in the Red Waste of Essos and you were the answer to all his prayers. I did not believe him. Of course, I was blinded by my own thoughts on the matter.”

“Of course.” Brienne frowned as lightening streaked across the sky. It was still some miles from them, but the storm was nearing. “You’ll want to bring your Dothraki in from beyond the walls. I know they prefer the camps, but it would be safer for them if they sought shelter in the barracks. The storms here are not as terrible as those of my home, but they are still formidable. The winds and rains will be cold, and it will worsen as winter progresses. Winter here may not bring the deep snows we saw at Winterfell, but it will have its own challenges.”

Daenerys nodded gratefully. “I will see it done, thank you.” She pushed away from the balcony. “To that end, I have kept you too long, I am sure. I should let you return to your duties.”

“Your Grace,” Brienne nodded as she turned to take her leave.

“Perhaps one day,” the Queen called after her, “when I call you cousin, it will be more than a
courtesy you are owed by birthright, and perhaps you might then return the favor.”

She looked back, and for a moment she was startled by the genuine hope she saw, though it was quickly hidden behind the polite mask of a Queen. “One day,” she agreed, “perhaps.”

Daenerys watched her go and turned back to the storm for a moment. She could not help but feel that it was the herald of something else, something much darker than the changing weather. What that was, she could not name, but she would have to be watchful. For the time being, she was more than aware that Tyrion was going to have a fit when he heard of her plan, but she thought Jon might approve of her choice.

Whether it was right or not, only time would tell, but for the moment she had bought herself some time; she did not think there would be any betrayals from that end, at least not so soon, but she would wait, and she would see.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

Well... she named a Lord of Storm's End who would be loyal to her. Why not an heir that would bring other alliances, and is known for her oath keeping.
The song of steel meeting sounded throughout the training yards. Two figures circled each other slowly, their swords pressed together as they got the measure of one another. The blunted training swords may not cut flesh, but the wounds they left still ached, and both men would walk away with a few stinging marks left upon their bodies.

“I am not going to yield,” the younger of the pair scowled. His dark eyes were serious beneath the fringe of straight brown hair across his forehead. “There’s no shame in admitting defeat.”

“I think you’ve gotten a little too cocky with that new title,” the elder told him. “You’ll yield well enough when you’re laying in the dirt.”

His brow arched. Podrick let his eyes shift, just for a moment, to sweep over the other man. “Then why are you so dusty, Lord Lannister?”

His lips peeled back in a grimace. It had been weeks since the men began calling him that, and he tried to get those who knew him best to let the title go, but they would not. Every time he heard it he wanted to look around for his father. He knew that Podrick was taunting him with it. The boy would pay for that. “It’s hardly my fault your Knight has taught you to fight dirty, young Pod. What has she been teaching you in that frozen wasteland?” Jaime heard a scoff from behind him and knew that he would pay for that, and not at Podrick’s hand.

Podrick’s wrist flicked and he knocked the other man’s sword aside. “That you squint right before you strike,” he shot back and twisted before he could be struck again. “Has your eyesight started to fail you, my lord?” His arm moved, lifting and turning, but the blow was blocked before it could land by a cleverly delivered parry.

“I can still see well enough to notice you’re still grimacing before you lunge,” he taunted. “You’ll pay for that one, Podrick, Ser or not. You know better.” Jaime clucked his tongue at the young knight, and sure enough, from the corner of his eye he could see Brienne scowling at the young man.

“For crying out loud, Podrick.” Her voice rang across the yard, “stop playing and spar. You’re as bad as he is.” She folded her arms across her chest and glared at the pair of them. “This is a training session, not a dancing lesson.”

Jaime tilted his head and flashed a saucy smirk at her. “I thought they were one in the same, my lady, or perhaps you only think so when you’re dancing with me.”

Her brow arched. “If that helps you feel better when I best you, my lord, by all means.”

“It’s a good thing you’ve given her command of our armies, coz.” Daven Lannister leaned against the wood rail that circled the training yard and grinned happily as he watched his cousin barely block another blow from the young man he was sparring with. “You’ve been knocked into the dust twice now by a green boy. Would that we’d had her with us to take the city. Perhaps you would have made it through the battle without that tiny scratch Greyjoy gifted you with.”

“I know not how much longer I can watch this,” Ser Lyle Crakehall sighed. “He is a bloody peacock and showing off for a bride that is already his, and not much interested in his arrogance. Be done with it, Jaime, my patience grows thin.” He folded his thick arms across his chest and glanced at the
Lady who stood with them, nay, a Knight, and better than many a man he’d ever fought. “Leave it to the Westermen, Ser, and we’d find you a better husband than this old Lion.”

There were not many men who stood taller than she did, not that she had met in any case, but Ser Lyle topped her by a couple of inches and was broader of chest and shoulder too. The man was descended of giants, she was almost certain of it, from the size of him to the thick black hair that hung to his shoulders. He was loud and strong and it had been all that she could do to best him when they sparred earlier, but best him she had done, and it was just as Jaime had warned her. The bloody man now considered her his equal and possibly his better, though he was far more decorous than Tormund had ever been. Much of his attitude, however, seemed to be in poking fun at his old friend, and liege, who from what she was currently seeing, deserved all of it.

Brienne sighed. “I am tempted to allow that. Oh for the love of…” She grimaced at the sloppy display in front of her. Podrick was almost as concerned with taunting Jaime as he was with besting him. She had taught him better than that, but he had been two days in the presence of Lord Tyrion and Ser Bronn. The only solace she could find in that was that she knew neither man would have access to him when he went North with Lady Sansa again.

“The last time he showed off quite like this,” Ser Addam drawled, “we were green boys ourselves. Three and ten, I think, and all of us trying to win the favor of Princess Elia Martell.” He cut a look to his right, “Do you remember that, Daven?”

The man snorted and scratched at his shaggy, golden beard. “Aye, I remember it well enough, I remember when Oberyn knocked you on your arse and dumped the wine on Lyle’s head.” He shook his head. “And I remember Lord Tywin near to thundering the walls down when he caught us, and there was Jaime wrestling in the dirt with one of Oberyn’s men, fighting with his fists like a common street urchin. What was it the fellow called you, little coz?”

Tyrion shrugged. He was seated on a barrel at the end of the rail, watching the training while he sipped from a goblet of wine. “Nothing I had not heard before or since, but most were usually wiser not to say it where my brother could hear the slurs.” That was the reality of being a dwarf, even one born to House Lannister, but his big brother had never hesitated at defending his honor. “If there’s any to be blamed for the show we’re forced to witness now, it’s the pair of you.” Jaime was toying with Podrick, which was clear enough to see. He might not have been the fighter he was before the loss of his hand, but he wasn’t near as slow or graceless as he was currently pretending. “Had the two of you not fallen all over yourselves acting like the fools you are, promising the Lady flowers, gold, and exotic Essosi gifts, my idiot brother might not be making even more of a fool of himself than he normally does.”

“We only wanted to make sure she was aware that there were better options,” Daven grinned, “before she was bound to the likes of him for the rest of her life.”

“Fortunate it is then,” Brienne reminded them, and none too softly, “that she is capable of making her own decisions and choosing her own suitors, else you might have—Podrick!” Her former squire had tumbled right into the trap that Jaime had been setting for him the entire time they had been sparring. Now he was wheeling backwards, his steps far too quick to resemble anything close to the footwork she had taught him. She rolled her eyes with a huff when he ended up in the dirt, Jaime’s training sword pointed at his nose, and quite thoroughly trounced. Her betrothed was smirking at her. He was altogether entirely too pleased with himself. She slanted a look at Ser Addam beside her. “Though it does him good to have his ego pruned every so often.”

Ser Addam grinned widely. “Of that task we shall never yield, Ser.” He bowed gallantly toward her before taking up his training sword and striding toward the yard. “Come on, young Ser Podrick,
what you need is a sparring partner that is a fighter and not a peacock. We shan’t have your knight thinking all her teachings were for naught.”

Jaime joined them at the rail and leaned against it. He tilted his head and smiled crookedly at her, waiting for praise. Brienne shook her head at him. “You are pathetic.”

“His every move is a shade of you,” he told her, “I was only having a bit of fun to draw it out for a while, else it would have been over in only moments.” Her former squire was not nearly as fast or strong, but he knew all of her moves and could anticipate them, which made fighting with Podrick entirely too easy. The younger man would acquit himself well against most anyone else.

“Hm.” She pursed her lips in displeasure and continued to watch Podrick’s progress as he faced off with Ser Addam. The other man fought with a flourish, but he did not exaggerate, as Jaime was wont to do. It was a much better match and Podrick was looking as though he had actually been trained at some point in his life. “You may simply want to keep in mind that if it is a peacock I wish to wed, young Lord Serrett would suffice, and it is not yet too late to make the switch. I am certain both my father and the Queen would understand.”

“They say the maids and serving girls of Silverhill sing songs of his beauty,” Addam drawled. “He’s tall and dark, with eyes the color of the sky.” He sidestepped Podrick and parried to block a blow. The boy was fast and well trained, and what he lacked in raw talent he made up for in diligence. The woman had done well with him, most men would not have bothered, he thought. She would make a good commander, he supposed, if she applied the same aptitude to leading as she had training her squire.

“That’s true enough.” Daven grinned crookedly. The sun glinted off his long, golden hair. “They say he rides like he was born to the saddle, with a jousting lance in one hand and a sword in the other.”

Jaime cut a look toward his cousin. “Whose side are you on, anyway?”

“I learned long ago, coz, to never anger the women in this family. They are at turns, devious, wicked, or dangerous. Now you’ve gone and found one that not only carries a sword, but has also put me in the dirt in front of my own men, my cousins, and half the guard. Aunt Genna is going to love her. The lot of us will be cast out of Casterly Rock and quite possibly the whole of the Westerlands after she’s met your Lady Knight, while the two of them take over the kingdom. Aye, I’m on her side, you poor sod.”

Lyle roared with laughter as he pushed away from the rail. He clapped his lord on the shoulder and turned him back toward the training yard. “I’ll give you a spar, my lord. It’s been too long since the boar and the lion clashed, I think.”

“I really don’t want to,” Jaime told him, but walked toward the yard. “This is going to hurt.” He cast a beseeching look at Brienne from over his shoulder. “It always hurts. Will you carry me back to the Keep when Ser Lyle has finished crippling me, my Lady?”

“Unfortunately, I will not be here to see you properly defeated. I must go if I wish not to be late for my meeting with the Queen and Lady Sansa.” She was reluctant to leave the training yard, and it showed in her manner as her shoulders hunched.

Jaime stopped walking and turned. He barely grimaced when Lyle bumped into his shoulder and kept going. “You’re meeting with Queen Daenerys and Lady Sansa? Today? Whatever for?” That was a disaster waiting to happen, he thought. If he had been worried about Brienne meeting with the Queen, as she had the day before, the idea of her meeting with the Queen and Sansa Stark was almost terrifying. The two of them might well ignite the wildfire that was still being found throughout
the city just by being within a league of it.

“Indeed.” Tyrion smiled proudly. “Lord Stark has asked the Queen and his sister to make peace with
one another. They have found a project they think will assist them in finding a commonality between
them.” His mismatched eyes sparkled deviously. It had been his idea, though he would be the last
person to ever whisper a word of it to Brienne, he valued his continued good health too much.

“What project could they have possibly found that interests them both?” Jaime looked from Tyrion to
Brienne, who appeared as though she would like nothing more than to go far from the capitol,
possibly on some new quest that would take years to complete.

“The wedding,” she muttered, and felt less terrible at her reticence about it when he winced in
sympathy. “Excuse me Sers, I am needed for my fitting.”

Tyrion watched her go and lifted his goblet. “Fare thee well, Ser Brienne, but it is only a gown, not
an execution.”

Her lip curled when she glowered at him. She muttered as she passed him, “I would almost rather the
execution, I think.”

Jaime waited until she had gone before he cast a hard, knowing look at his brother. “You do
understand we’re only having a bloody wedding because her father is here, don’t you? Were it not
for him, we’d have had it done and been on our way to Casterly Rock already.” By way of Tarth, he
supposed and would not have minded, but they’d have been well away from King’s Landing all the
same. It was not a place where either of them particularly wanted to be.

“Which is more than enough reason to let someone else do the planning of it; who better than her
Lady, the Wardeness of the North, and her cousin, the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. Marriages are
for building alliances, and so our brave Ser Brienne is facilitating a parlay between two very strong
opposing forces. This may end up being the most important gown fitting in the history of the realm.”
He emptied his goblet and tossed it to the squire that was standing nearby holding a wineskin. For
the life of him, Tyrion could not remember the boy’s name. Was it Grephon? Marven? Jephon?
Definitely something that ended in an N, he thought.

“This is a very bad idea!” Jaime scrubbed a hand over his face. “Podrick, tell him this is a bad idea,
his might listen to you because the Gods know he’s never listened to me.”

Podrick blocked another blow and twisted, moving into Ser Addam’s body and sliding easily under
his arm to swipe his training sword across the man’s side. “It’s a very bad idea, my lord.”

“See!” Jaime pointed his training sword at the younger man. “Podrick knows. There is nothing that is
in any way good that can come from you sending Brienne off to be alone with Sansa Stark and
Daenerys Targaren in a room where there will be needles and quite possibly fabric… cutting…
things.” He shook his sword in his brother’s direction as he struggled to recall the name of such
things.

“Shears you mean?” Tyrion smirked. “Are you telling me, brother, that you are worried about your
Lady Knight being in a room with two other women who might choose to take up sewing needles,
tailoring pins, and cutting shears against one another if diplomatic relations fail, after she has spent
the last two days beating Ser Daven Lannister, Ser Addam Marbrand, and the bloody Strongboar
into the dirt? While the rest of us looked on and cheered,” he glanced at his kin, “no offense cousin.”

“I cheered quite loudly myself this morning,” Daven nodded. “I take no offense to truth.”
“You are certainly a wiser man than my brother, who would rather sulk and complain about all the things that we cannot change and that simply must be.” He wriggled down off the barrel and landed on his ill formed legs with a wince. “Let the women have their gowns and wedding plans, and when they are done for the day, Ser Brienne will return and take her frustrations out on you and Podrick, dear brother. The sun will still set in the eve and rise in the morn, life will go on.” He looked at the squire with a puzzled expression. “What is your name, boy?”

“Garrett, my lord. I am called Garrett Paege,” the boy bowed slightly. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Huh.” Tyrion shook his head. “I could have sworn your name was Alyn. No matter. I have to attend a meeting with our good friend Ser Bronn. I think I might have finally found a castle that the Queen both approves of giving him and might actually shut him up for a while. Worry not, brother, it is far from the Westerlands. Podrick, when you are finished letting these old men pretend they have beaten you, come and find me. We will have a drink with Bronn while both your Ladies are otherwise occupied.”

Jaime snorted when Podrick agreed. “On your head be it. I’m not saving you from her when she finds out.” He stepped into the training circle and barely had a moment to draw a breath before he was ducking away from a hard swing from Ser Lyle. Bloody Strongboar indeed.

The younger knight huffed a sigh. “I’m not her squire anymore,” he grumbled.

Ser Addam took a moment to shake his head at the boy. “In their minds, you’ll always be their squire. It doesn’t matter if you’ve ten name days or twenty, nor how many tourneys or battles you’ve won. They will always be stronger, faster, and know better.”

While he was blocking a blow from Ser Lyle, Jaime risked a glance at the squire, one of the boys who had been serving him during the past many weeks. “I thought your name was Stevan,” he said. The boy smiled. “It is, my lord.” He placed the wineskin and goblet on the barrel and walked closer to the yard to have a better look at the sparring. “Yesterday he could not stop calling me Godrick, and the day before that it was Wilphen. Tomorrow he will be back to calling me Podrick, I am sure.”

Daven laughed heartily. “Go and fetch a couple more swords, lad, that’s earned you a round or two in the yards. Let us see what we can teach you in exchange for your good service.”

The boy smiled brightly before running off to do as he’d been told. Jaime’s entire arm vibrated with the blow that he blocked. “Do we not think I should be training my own squire?”

Addam pushed Podrick away and whirled to his left to avoid another blow. “Have you ever trained a squire before?”

He started to open his mouth but it was Podrick that snorted and replied, “No, he really has not.”

“Are you going to spar or do intend only to flap your tongue?” Lyle swept the flat of his sword against the back of the other man’s legs and knocked him into the dirt, “For surely, my lord, you’ve never been able to do both.”

Jaime groaned. He felt the ache of that defeat through every bone in his body. “Well, at least there was no one around but you lot to see it.”

“I’d not be so certain of that, were I you, Lord Lannister.”

Jaime lifted his head from the dirt and groaned at the sight of his future goodfather, obviously having arrived just in time to see his besting. “Seven hells.” He held out his left hand, “Help me up, Lyle,
before the Stormlander thinks a Westerman is so easily knocked into the dirt.”

“Were I not knocked into the dirt by a Stormlander just this morn, I might dispute that fact.” He reached down and hauled the other man to his feet. “Come along,” he clapped him on the shoulder, “we’ll show the squires how the fighting is really done, and then we’ll send them off to fetch us good wine and even better food.”

“And hot baths for sore muscles,” Jaime made a face as he strolled along behind him.

“Or perhaps what you need is a Stormlander to teach you to fight better.” Lord Selwyn held out his hand for Ser Lyle’s training sword and accepted it with a nod. He held it in his hand for a moment, getting the balance of it before he nodded. “Let’s go, boy, I’ve been looking forward to this moment since I arrived on the mainland.” It was the first time he had managed to catch his future goodson in the training yards, the boy was slipping if he was being so sloppy.

Jaime’s eyes narrowed. “You’re left handed.” He pointed his sword at the man’s hand. “That sneaky wench!” His eyes lit with sudden understanding. Was it no wonder that she always knew where his blows were going to come from before he had even lifted his arm? She was still better than he was, better than he had ever been, but they would be talking about this! He fully intended to pay her back for that very next time he met her in the yard. Jaime frowned. If there was a next time. Her father was watching him intently. He could refuse, beg off, contrive some excuse that would take him away from the yards and no doubt keep him in one piece long enough for him to be wed, and if Jaime were a smarter man, he might do just that. Alas, he was not, and everyone in the yard knew that he was not.

The Lord of the Westerlands gave a bow before he walked back into the training circle. The time had finally arrived. He was absolutely going to die, and from the gleam in the other man’s eyes, he knew that if he didn’t he would surely end up wishing that he had. Though the eye color was wrong, Jaime knew the determined gleam all too well.

He would rather have been at the gown fitting with Queen Daenerys and the Lady of Winterfell.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

I intended to post this last night, but then I got distracted... by a certain gown. I was verklempt. I might still be. Let's just say that I stupidly thought I was going to write Chapter 30 last night. No. Ver-klempt.

I also want to take a moment to thank everyone. I just can't do that enough. You are all wonderful. I am so grateful for all your comments/kudos/reading. Thank you so much!
Brienne would have rather been back in the training yards, facing off with a hundred squires or knights, even if all of them defeated her and she was left bruised and sore. She could not even remember the night of the great battle against the dead being so cold as the chamber where she met with Lady Sansa and Queen Daenerys.

She had returned to her rooms to bathe and change before meeting with them. What she found upon arriving was a room filled with seamstresses and lady’s maids, while the two women appeared to glower or ignore one another from one moment to the next. Arya had seated herself across a high backed chair in the corner, near a window through which bright, afternoon sunlight was streaming. She looked on at the happenings with an amused smirk. It was hard to believe it had stormed so terribly just the night before. Or perhaps that storm had heralded this moment.

Brienne’s brow furrowed with confusion. The room was a mess of fabrics and colors, leather, fitted bodices of carefully shaped whalebone, and surprisingly… steel. From all that, and knowing well that the women would probably never be exactly friendly, there was only one question pressing upon her mind, “Why is Lord Gendry here?”

The smith turned lord was standing in the corner near Arya, as though she might somehow shield him from all that was to come. “Taking up dress making,” he said with a shrug.

“I tried to talk them out of this,” Arya assured her, “but no one seems to want to listen to me. Or you. I think we should just get on a boat and leave. You can even bring that cranky old lion if you want to. It would definitely be better than this.” She picked up a wad of lace and made a face at it.

“Arya,” Sansa looked up from the directions that she and the Queen were attempting to give the lead seamstress, “no one is going anywhere. We need Brienne for the fitting.”

“Why does there have to be a fitting,” Arya argued, “she doesn’t want a dress. Did you even ask? No, of course not, why would the Lady of Winterfell or the Dragon Queen ever bother to ask anyone what they wanted.” She rolled her eyes toward Gendry in a knowing look. This was almost exactly why she had told him that she wouldn’t wed him, because somehow she would have ended up standing in the middle of a room with her sister and a lot of women she didn’t know, putting on a dress that she absolutely loathed. “Brienne, say the word and I will kill them all.”

The Unsullied guard at the door straightened and took a step forward. Daenerys immediately held up a hand. “No one is killing anyone.” She cast a dark look at Arya. “Though I do not recall inviting Lady Arya.”

“I invited her,” Sansa replied. She drew herself to her full height in front of the other woman and looked down her nose at her. “Brienne is sworn to protect both my mother’s daughters. She is part of our household, and we would both see her properly wed.”

She was tempted to pinch the bridge of her nose, but Brienne rolled her eyes toward the heavens instead. “I think I should have remained at Winterfell. Or perhaps it would have been more prudent to return to Tarth for the wedding. We could go and be back in time for the coronation.” At which time she and the Queen would have other business to finalize, though that remained between the two of them.
Arya reached for the table beside her and lifted a flagon of wine. “I thought we might need this, you and I. We are the only ones here that still have any sense left.” She heard Gendry clear his throat. “You’re in a room full of women and dress parts,” she told him, “that doesn’t qualify as sense.”

“We should make it longer,” Sansa stated, ignoring them, and pointed to the length of whalebone that the seamstress was holding. “It should give shape to her actual frame, not try to frame her into its shape, as her armor would. Is a gown not a lady’s armor?”

“A fair point,” Gendry decided with a nod in Arya’s direction, and decided it was probably best if he just ignored the goings on until someone decided that he was actually needed.

“But you think to line it with leather and linen?” Daenerys did not look convinced. Would the brown of the leather not clash with the colors of the gown? Was the leather even appropriate for such an occasion?

“Linen on the inside for comfort,” Sansa drew her fingers along the inner portion of the framework, “with the leather on the outside, where it will be seen. The idea of the gown will be uncomfortable enough without it also being physically displeasing.”

“But you intend only the front and back to be leather,” the seamstress questioned, “and for the bodice to be draped in fabric to soften the look.”

Since they were speaking as though she had not actually arrived, Brienne turned a slow circle in the room. One of the maids was measuring out lengths of a fragile looking lace, while another was holding up swaths of patterned fabric to the light. Two of the maids were draping material across the fitted whalebone casings that would, no doubt, make her miserable. That most of the fabric appeared to be pink was the final straw. “I am not wearing that,” she pointed at the lace, “and I am definitely not wearing that,” her lip curled at the pale rose fabric that looked too thin to be made into anything. “You can send that to the bloody dragon,” she told the woman that was holding a length of crushed pink velvet while her squire, her own bloody squire, was assisting with the measuring of it. She was having visions of a pit and a snarling bear. “I don’t actually need a dress,” she declared, “nor do I even want one, I’m only here because Lord Jon asked, and unless someone in this room tells me what the leather, steel, and Gendry are for, I am leaving.”

Arya poured wine into a goblet with a grin. “I told you the pink was a bad choice.”

“It’s rose,” Daenerys pointed out. “They are her house colors. I thought that was the custom in Westeros?” She looked to Sansa. “Is it not?”

“It is,” Sansa agreed, if a bit reluctantly. “I was actually thinking we would use the blue instead. There will be rose on her cloak, and not enough of it to… alarm her.”

“I am not alarmed.” Brienne was still scowling at the pink. They could call it what they wanted but it was bloody well pink and not rose. She should know, they were her House colors, after all.

“It would help if we had another dress to measure it to,” the seamstress said. “to help us get the basic cutting correct before we start fitting.” She tilted her head as she studied the woman the gown was apparently meant for. “We may need more fabric… and leather.”

“Were there any such gowns to be had,” Sansa told them, “I would have had Jory bring them. They simply do not exist. Ser Brienne does not actually own any gowns.”

Daenerys’s brows shot up. “None at all?” It was true that she had never witnessed her cousin attired in such, not even at the feast following their victory at Winterfell. She simply thought it had been a
result of their circumstances at the time.

“Not even one.” Sansa turned to her first and most trusted knight. “I do not believe I have ever seen you in a gown, now that I think on it. A skirt once, perhaps, at Joffrey’s wedding, I think.”

Brienne sighed at the way both women were looking at her. “I do not wear gowns, my Lady, your grace. I do not prefer them.”

“Perhaps because no one has ever thought to ask her what kind of gown she would like to wear, even when she is standing in the same room with them.” Arya leaned to one side to be seen past Brienne’s very tall form. “That might be a good place to start, an even better place would be the part where she told you that she didn’t need a gown. Not everyone needs to wear pretty dresses to be a lady, Sansa.”

“Yes,” Sansa replied, “I am perfectly aware of that, Arya.” She drew a breath and let it out slowly while she asked the gods to give her patience. “Were it a dress that we are making, then I would ask her. As it is, we are not.” While the Queen and the seamstresses looked shocked, Sansa cast a look at Brienne that could only be called amused. “You did not really think I would ask that of you?”

“Yes,” Sansa replied, “I am perfectly aware of that, Arya.” She drew a breath and let it out slowly while she asked the gods to give her patience. “Were it a dress that we are making, then I would ask her. As it is, we are not.” While the Queen and the seamstresses looked shocked, Sansa cast a look at Brienne that could only be called amused. “You did not really think I would ask that of you?”

“Then what are we doing here?” Daenerys huffed with exasperation. “What exactly was the point of pulling all of this together and wasting everyone’s time if it is not a gown that we are making?”

Sansa turned to the seamstresses and maids and gestured for the door. “Would you all wait outside? Just for a few minutes, I assure you.” She waited as the women departed, and noticed that Arya had held Gendry back when he might have made good his escape. She almost smiled at that. Instead, she turned her attention back to the Queen. “Because Jon and Tyrion are men, and this was all their idea.” Sansa walked over and perched on a chair. She looked from the Queen to Brienne and back again. “As clever as Tyrion may be, he is never going to understand the way a woman’s mind works, and Jon... well, I love my brother but...” She shrugged helplessly. “The two of them have decided that the only way you and I are ever going to get to know one another, or come to trust each other is to do so while making dresses and talking of wedding plans and feasts.”

“Actually, I’m more certain it was Tyrion’s idea and Jon just agreed with it because he’s Jon,” Arya shrugged. “It is a pretty stupid idea.” A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “No offense to your new brother,” She told Brienne.

The older woman’s eyes narrowed. For someone who seemed so willing to help her out of this situation, Arya was also awfully gleeful about it. “I do not recall anything in my oath to your mother about injuries you might obtain while training.”

“No maiming before the wedding,” Sansa warned them both, “and no visible bruises either.”

Daenerys’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Then if it was not your intention for us to actually work together, why are we both here? Why am I here?”

“I am loath to give Tyrion the impression his poorly considered idea actually worked,” Sansa explained, “but Brienne is sworn to me for life.” She glanced at her friend and protector, “though I have given her leave to remain with her husband when I return to the North.” Her blue eyes danced with mischief and amusement. “Unless by the time I leave he has managed to annoy her to the point of wanting to return with me.”

“Always a possibility,” Brienne agreed. Her own lips pursed while her eyes crinkled with mirth.

“Through our oath the North and the Westerlands will be allies. Brienne will always have a place
beside me and I know that she will come to me if I call,” Sansa told the Queen.

“With the army that her husband has graciously given her command of,” the Queen stated blandly. A cold chill ran down her spine. Would the North rise up against her with the aid of the Lannisters and their Westermen? Would all of her planning be for naught if her cousin chose to betray her anyway?

“If it is so needed,” Sansa stated. Her smile faded while her tone grew just as devoid of emotion. While the two women stared at one another she tilted her chin, back straightening with pride and defiance. “The point that I was attempting to make, however, is that until her last day or mine, Ser Brienne will come to my side whenever I have need of her. Much as your blood riders would do for you. Since I have been reunited with him, I have heard my brother Bran say often that we all have parts to play. I honestly do not know what he means,” Sansa shrugged. “I cannot say if he meant in the fight against the dead, or if there is something greater yet to come.” Her gaze swept the room again, this time to also encompass Gendry before turning back to the Queen. “What I do know is that Ser Brienne is also your cousin. I do not like you,” she said plainly, “and I do not say that to be cruel. I do not know you. You fought for my home, and my people, and lost people that you cared for in the process. I will not forget that. The North Remembers.” Sansa stood up again and walked to stand in front of the Dragon Queen. “I swore an oath to Ser Brienne, too, that I would never ask anything of her that would bring her dishonor. I would not ask her to turn on her family. You are her family, and you are Jon’s family, and for them I am here and trying not to be so… northern about everything.”

The Queen’s shoulders slumped with relief. “I do not like you either,” she admitted. “I want to, truly, because of Jon and for the sake of peace, but…” She looked from Sansa to the others before she held up her hands in defeat. “You judged me before you even met me, though I suppose considering the other Queen you had known, that was to be expected.” She looked away for a moment while she considered everything. Daenerys nodded when she came to a decision. “We will start again, and perhaps we can learn to be civil if nothing else.” A single brow arched. “And we will plot ways of teaching my Master of Laws that women are capable of conversing about more than dresses, and parties, and feasts.”

“Let’s do,” Sansa nodded, “though I almost feel like I understand the gap in his knowledge. He was married to me for a short time, and I used to think only of pretty dresses, handsome knights, and extravagant balls.”

“She used to be an absolute shit,” Arya stated. “Can we go back to talking about the not-a-dress? We have things we’d like to do and sitting here all day is not one of them.”

“My apologies, Your Grace,” Sansa rolled her eyes. “I think you’ve met my sister, Arya, who has absolutely no ability to be even remotely courteous.”

“I don’t lie to people and say things I don’t mean.” Arya rolled her eyes at her sister. “The two of you don’t like each other because you’re a lot alike. The only difference is that she wants to fuck Jon and you just want to own him,” she pushed herself out of her chair. “Neither of you is especially fond of sharing because you never had to before. You don’t want anyone else to rule you because the people who ruled you in the past were bigger shits than you are. Brienne doesn’t want to wear a dress; Jaime won’t care if she weds him in leather or armor, and would probably prefer her to be bare. Or… maybe he meant he wanted there to be a bear at the wedding.” She frowned. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

“You truly do not.” Brienne sighed. “Perhaps we should get back to the reason why we are all here,” she decided. She knew only to well that if left unchecked the Stark sisters could devolve from bickering to shouting at one another, and that could only lead them to plotting together.
“It isn’t too late for me to find you another husband,” Daenerys told her. “I wouldn’t mind, truly.”

“Lost cause,” Sansa told her. “She actually likes the one she has, or is going to have, anyway. I agree, though. We should get back to it. Lord Gendry, show them.”

Suddenly all eyes were on him and the young, bastard born, Lord of Storm’s End fought the urge to fidget. He brought out the rolled parchment that he brought with him and carefully opened it for them. He walked over and laid it on the table that stood to one side of the room. “I drew it very quickly this morning, so I’m sure it needs improving.”

Brienne stood and moved to his side. She looked over his shoulder at the design that he had etched onto parchment with charcoal. “You designed it as though it was armor,” she murmured, and did not mind that it appeared to have been drawn with her measurements in mind. It was softer than armor, however, and far more feminine. It was made to highlight the long lines of her body and the very faint curve of her waist where it met her hips. It was not the shape that was so captivating, however, it was the flowing lines of various sigils that he had drawn into the design.

On the left was the direwolf of House Stark, head raised as it howled at a crescent Tarth moon. An intricate network of filigree had been drawn around the two shapes and flowed in clean lines to the plates that would adorn her right side. There they found the charging lion of House Lannister, it’s head thrown back and a single paw raised, reaching toward a sun as it rose in the east.

Daenerys drew a breath as she reached out to trace the lines that curled around wolf and lion, sun and moon. “It’s a dragon,” she realized. It was almost hidden in the filigree, but her eyes spied the familiar form, a single head of her own three-headed sigil. The dragon was wrapped around the figures, it’s head and wings curled around the wolf while it’s tail wrapped around the lion. “Hidden in plain sight,” she realized.

“Aye,” Gendry nodded. He glanced at the ladies that had come to stand around him. “I thought it might be fitting. Since everyone thought you were the last.”

“In a single day we will join four houses and three kingdoms,” Sansa pointed out. “It will be the most united that the Seven Kingdoms have been in many decades, and a much stronger alliance than the one that was created when Cersei Lannister of the Westerlands wed Robert Baratheon of the Stormlands and the Targaryen loyalists of the Reach and the Crownlands accepted a Baratheon on the Iron Throne. When Robert’s Rebellion ended, that marriage united two kingdoms, but the others were united with promises of honor and friendship.” She looked beyond the queen to the woman who was meant to wear this symbol of their changed world. “I will trust you with my life until my last breath or yours.”

She felt her heart swell with warmth and pride. It was far more than she had hoped for when she had first set out from King’s Landing all those years ago, never knowing if she would ever find the girl she was sworn to protect. Brienne bowed her head in a solemn nod. “As I would trust you with mine,” she said quietly. She had worried what her Lady might think, after the coronation, when the Queen’s plan was revealed. Brienne realized now that Sansa would understand it. She might already be considering it with this design she had asked Gendry to create.

“Through your father you are the blood of Old Valyria,” Daenerys pointed out. “Our way is fire and blood. We protect what is ours. I would choose a better husband for you,” she repeated, while her fingers traced the lines of the dragon as it wrapped around the proud and charging lion. “But that is not my choice to make. Still, the Lady of Winterfell is correct. Our houses will be joined. I do not know you well, cousin, as you once pointed out, but you stood bravely for your beliefs, and I know that you fought braver still to defeat the army of the dead. I wish you happiness.”
“Thank you, Your Grace.” Brienne studied the image for a moment longer before she shook her head. “It is beautiful, truly, my lord, but it is almost too much to bear.”

“It must feel like the weight of an entire realm,” Arya remarked. “It is good then, that you are so strong.”

Brienne sighed as she turned away from them. “I never wanted to be,” she admitted. “It was a trick of fate and my birth. I used to believe that the Gods were surely cruel to make one such as I.” She lowered herself into a chair and allowed her shoulders to slump. “If we all have our parts to play, as Lord Bran says, then what is the game?”

“That is a question that I have long wished I knew the answer to.” Daenerys sat, her back straight as she found a seat on a long, cushioned bench. “I thought being Queen was my destiny, that I was meant to rule these kingdoms that were taken from my family. Now that I am here, when I weigh what it has cost me, I ask myself why anyone ever makes this choice, yet I would not give it up.”

“Power is like sweet wine, one taste and you find yourself wanting more.” Sansa wandered around the room and lifted a length of deep, blue fabric that was soft to the touch. “I have seen it in others. I have felt it myself,” she admitted. “The more power you have, the more others want to take it from you, and the more desperate you become to hang on to it.”

“You think the more power you have, the harder it is for people to hurt you.” Arya shook her head at them, “that just makes it easier. They have something to take from you then. Better to have nothing but your blade and your wits.”

“If you have nothing, and others can take nothing from you, then what have you done but fulfill their wants?” Brienne shook her head. “There are moments it all seems so very pointless, a cycle of selfish desires that keeps turning generation, after generation.”

“You are never like this,” Sansa told her. “What is bothering you? Truly?” She folded her hands in front of her with a frown. “If you do not wish to wed, tell me now, and I will send you back to Winterfell or home with your father.”

“Or I would have you for my Queensguard,” Daenerys told her. “That is a task I still have not completed, naming those who should keep me safe. I could trust you, I think.” And if she had her oath, for life, she would not need her as her heir. She could almost feel the heat of the scowl that Lady Sansa cast in her direction. Daenerys returned her gaze with a raised brow. “If she was sworn to both of us, would we not then be allies?”

“No, it is not the marriage that bothers me,” Brienne assured them, before the argument could become more heated. It was not her they argued over, but the power to control her. She decided not to take it to heart, as it was more proof of the distrust the two women felt toward one another. “I would just have it done and be away from here. I do not mean offense,” she told the Queen, “but these courtly games are not to my liking, so many lies and false courtesies.”

“Then play no more games,” Arya stated, as though it were as simple as that. “No more lies or courtesies, be honest.”

Daenerys’s brows rose. “Are you ever anything but?” She smiled at the girl who meant so much to her Jon. The girl’s skill was worrisome, but it was also refreshing to be around one who had no want or appreciation for sweet words or falsities. “Why not,” she decided and stood, “just us, right here in this room, and Lord Gendry if he would like to stay.”
“Truly, Your Grace,” He shook his head. “I would rather get to work in the forge. The metal will be easier to work with than the dragonglass, but there is much to be done and I will have to find smiths to assist, and someone to pour the enamel.” He had planned to etch the carvings in the armored pieces in blue and black, so that they were more noticeable to the eye.

“Please,” Daenerys waved toward the door. “Let us not keep you. I agree with Ser Brienne, it is a beautiful design. I look forward to seeing it completed.”

“Thank you,” he nodded, and turned to Arya and the others. “M’ladies.”

“I’ll find you later!” Arya called after him, and grinned when he disappeared, as though the wights north of Eastwatch were on his heels.

“If we are speaking honestly,” Sansa strode over and took a seat on the bench beside the Queen. There was still an arm’s length between them, but she turned so that she was facing the other woman. “Whose idea was it to do away with Hand to the Queen? Was that yours? Or was it theirs?”

“Theirs.” Daenerys frowned at her. “I did not like it at first, but I understand the concerns. The position has been used too often in the past to weaken the Throne. I will have a full council, but no one to rule in my name or with my voice.”

“A full council,” Sansa pointed out. “You are Queen, but you cannot dismiss any of your Council or add another without their vote. What then if you decide they are all stupid? What will you do when Lord Tyrion makes laws to allow the women who work in brothels to petition new callers at court?” He wouldn’t, she knew that, but it was the most ridiculous use for his power she could think of to use as an example. “What do you do when his brother, Warden of the West, votes with him because he can? What do we do when I am so disgusted with them both that I, Wardeness of the North, suggest that we outlaw all brothels and banish the men who would spend their coin so irresponsibly? Would the Warden of the South side with me, because he despises all Lannisters now? The Warden of the East is my cousin, and so may side with me because I tell him to. The Master of Ships is a good man, but would he rather take the advice of the Lord Paramount of the Stormlands, who would not want his goodson voting for brothels while his own daughter keeps their home, trains their armies, and raises their children? The Lord Paramount of the Riverlands will always advise against the Lannisters, you can count on that, even were they to suggest double shipments of food to his lands.” She tilted her head and frowned. “When the Warden of the West makes me angry because I do not like that he has so long kept my Knight from my side, and I send my armies to fetch her, what then?”

“Fetch me?” Brienne’s brows lifted. “I am not exactly one to be fetched, my Lady.”

Sansa almost smirked. She could see the crinkling of the other woman’s eyes. “I will call you to my side and he will sulk and pine, and make a nuisance of himself,” she warned, “so fetch you I must.”

As her warnings became more ridiculous in nature, Daenerys relaxed, by very small degrees. “I think I understand what you are saying. It was Lord Selwyn and Lord Jaime that brought the idea to the Council. Tyrion did not like it, and I did not either, but once they had explained themselves, I could see the wisdom in it. Other Hands have stood to the side while their Kings bankrupted or tore the kingdoms apart. Lord Tywin used his position to rule, to gain more power and gold for himself. They weakened the Throne, instead of strengthening it. I am not certain how I feel about the Council, but Jon sits at its head, and I trust him.”

“Do you?” Sansa stared hard at her. “Truly? He is the true heir. He has abdicated, and it is yours, but do you not worry they would rule through him? Ser Davos, Lord Jaime, Lord Selwyn, myself, my Uncle Edmure, Lord Willas, and even Sam?”
She took a breath and let it out slowly. Her gaze moved to each woman in turn before she finally shrugged. “I fear that is exactly what they will try to do. They think they are so clever, these men. They grasp at power, thinking to temper me, they give me counsel, thinking to wizen me, but I am Queen. I still have my dragon and my armies. I have lost much, but I can call to Essos for more. There are those who would come to me, to assist me as I rule this land.” She scowled. “I love Jon, but he does not want to rule. He does not want power. He wants to protect; all of us, really, you, me, the realm, that is all that he has ever known.” She heaved a sigh. “I came to this land the last of my family. I was the last Dragon. The last Targaryen. What did I find here instead? The man I would have as my lover and my consort was my nephew, the woman who protects his sister, who has been my rival since I came here, is my cousin. The bastard son of the man who destroyed my family is also my cousin. My uncle hid himself on his little island while his family was destroyed. My own brother sold me, for an army. I found my power by accident, but I took it. I claimed it. I swore to myself that I would never be sold again, and that I would not allow others to be traded as I had been, as property and objects. Even half a world away Robert Baratheon tried to have me killed, and my only crime was that I had been born to a House that had wounded his foolish male pride.”

“So you decided to take back from him what he took from you,” Sansa nodded. “Once you began, even when he was dead and you found it more difficult than you dreamed, you could not stop. If you were Queen, no one could sell you again. No one could take from you what you had already taken from them and you could protect others who did not have your power, or your armies, or your ability to bring people to your cause.”

“That meant other people had to die,” Arya said. “Bad people, those who had hurt you and others, and would keep hurting until you stopped them. Every life, every battle, it always seems like it should be easier, but it isn’t. It’s only easier if you become the monster you are stopping, but you know that if you don’t stop them, they will stop you.”

“But if you are a woman, then you are unnatural,” Brienne told them. “Why should the gods make you stronger than a man if you are not ill formed?”

“Why should the gods make you smarter than a man, if you are not cold?” Sansa said.

“Why should the gods give you the wits to be both ruthless and merciful, if you are not truly mad?” Daenerys shook her head.

“Why should the gods give you the ability to be swift with a blade,” Arya said, “if you are not cruel?”

“Because we are women.” Sansa sat straighter. “Our power should be between our legs, and no other place. That was the lesson that Cersei tried to teach me, that men would take what I would not give, and if I gave it correctly, I would control their power, their lives, and their very futures.”

“So here we are,” Daenerys said, “to find commonality and peace while making dresses.” Her nose wrinkled. “That is how the men think we are to bond. I cannot decide if it is more annoying or infuriating.”

“We’re not actually going to make dresses though,” Arya pointed out, “that is what you said earlier. What are we going to do then?”

“We are going to make armor.” Sansa smirked. “The bodice will be blue, and lined with leather and steel. She will wear breeches and boots, and her sword if she so wishes.” She waved a hand through the air. That was the easy part, and something she had envisioned since she heard of the ridiculous notion that her knight was marrying a Lannister. She studied Ser Brienne, her eyes narrowing.
“What?” She didn’t like that look. It was far too calculating. Usually when her Lady got that gleam in her eyes, Brienne ended up traipsing across the kingdoms on some foolish quest or another. “What are you thinking?”

Sansa’s lips had pursed in contemplation. “The actual vows have to be said in the sept, but why should we have a feast? Why must there be dancing? You don’t want a feast or a grand ball, or am I wrong in thinking that?”

“I would not mind a feast,” Brienne sighed, “but the very idea of the dancing, and the singing, and the bloody bedding ceremony…” She groaned. “I would much rather not. Something simple, but befitting both our stations, would be much more to my liking that is true. However…” Her shoulders slumped. “I am cousin to the Queen, and he is Warden of the West, so I understand—”

“No.” Daenerys shook her head. “My wedding was a nightmare. I was most uncomfortable throughout the entire ordeal. It was arranged to my husband’s liking, and nothing like what I had ever experienced before. What are you thinking?” She turned to Sansa. “Instead of a feast, how should we mark the occasion? Or should we? I have no problems ignoring my new Lannister relations,” her eyes glinted with mischief, “no offense, Cousin.”

“I think it is probably understandable,” Brienne replied. “There is really only the one I have found acceptable.” She shrugged when Arya snorted. “Ser Daven has been very courteous.”

Sansa pressed her fingers to her lips when laughter bubbled in her chest. “A tourney,” she told them. “Let us have a tourney to mark the occasion. They were knights before they were anything else. There will be feasting and drinking enough at the tourney, and we can have it outdoors.”

“Wouldn’t it be unseemly if the bride injured her new husband at the melee on her wedding day?” Arya smirked. “Amusing, but unseemly? Not that I care about such things, of course.”

“Why do the vows have to be spoken in the sept,” Daenerys asked, genuinely curious. “It is not done that way in Essos, and in the North do you not wed before the weirwood trees? As long as there is a septon, as Ser Brienne and Lord Jaime keep with the Faith of the Seven, does it matter where the vows are given? Could we not do it on the tourney grounds?”

“Armored and armed,” Sansa’s eyes widened. “Should we also make him fight for the right of wedding the Queen’s cousin?”

Brienne snorted. “He would lose.” The corners of her mouth were twitching toward a smile. “Though I did once swear I would marry none but he who could best me in a fight.”

“When you win, you could simply be merciful and grant him the honor anyway,” Arya shrugged. “Or claim the honor of protecting the seven kingdoms from his whinging.”

“I married a Dothraki Khal,” Daenerys told them, “and on that day, when blood was spilled before me, I was told that a Dothraki wedding without at least three deaths was a boring affair. I was horrified, but it was a wedding as befit my husband.” She stood up. “A tourney there shall be. A wedding for two knights without a sword fight, a melee, and a joust would be an occasion too far beneath my cousin, the first Lady Knight in the kingdoms that I will rule.” She turned to Brienne and a slow, wicked smile curved her lips. “Should Lord Lannister choose to enter the joust, I would be happy to ride against him… upon Drogon.”

“That is something I might like to see,” Sansa rose as well. “First, we must have outfits made to mark the occasion, and we have left the ladies waiting in the hall too long. While they get to work, perhaps we should speak of what else we might plan that the men would be scandalized about. They would
not expect women to plan a tourney.”

“We are not most women,” Daenerys stated. “I would hear your ideas, Lady Stark, of how we might rule this kingdom. We do not have to like each other to be able to work together. Surely a Queen, a Knight, a Lady, and…” She looked at Arya. “I do not mean to be rude, but…”

“A wolf.” She flashed a saucy grin. “I am a wolf, that is all. I want nothing more.”

“A wolf then,” Daenerys nodded. “Surely we can make our own plans for how to keep our people safe and our lands prosperous. I do not need the Council’s approval for that. I am still Queen. It is time these men are reminded of that fact. I would have Lady Sansa tell me what it is she needs to make the North feel strong once again. Arya and Ser Brienne have wandered the lands; they have seen how the smallfolk suffer. Speak truly, because I would not have it otherwise. Just because I do not like the sound of your words, does not mean I should not hear them.” As she spoke, she waved a hand at the door, and the guard there opened it to allow the maids and seamstresses back into the chamber.

Sansa nodded. “Then shall we begin?”

- TBC -

Chapter End Notes

In which Tyrion forgot just how well his ex-wife knows him. Or... has his ex-wife forgotten how well he knows her. The ladies are taking control, could that have been his plan all along? :-}
“Alright, girl, let’s see what bad habits you have learned while you have been traipsing across all of Westeros.”

Several heads turned at the sound of those words. The activity in the training yard came to a halt as all attention was turned to the Evenstar as he approached his daughter with a pair of carefully weighted training swords.

Jon, who had been training with Loren, glanced toward the edge of the yard where a small group of witnesses had already gathered. Sansa, who had felt like she needed to be outside the walls of the Keep for a while, had walked down with Podrick to watch the training. It had helped that she knew Brienne and Jon would be there. She was not surprised to find Arya gloating over the quick work she had made of her sparring session Ser Addam Marbrand, or Lord Jaime with his cousin, Ser Daven. Those three seemed to always be together, when she saw them about, and wherever they were, the larger man, Ser Lyle, was always with them.

“I told you he was as fucking crazy as the rest of them,” a low voice grumbled nearby. Sandor Clegane sneered at the scene before him as he came to lean against the rail that circled the yard. He had come down to keep an eye on the Little Bird and the She-Wolf while so many Lannisters were running about, not that Arya really needed his help, and walked right into the shit-show he was sure he would find. Sandor folded his arms over his chest. “Fancy knights and high lords, they’re all fucking nuts.”

Sansa slanted a look in his direction. The corners of her mouth moved toward a small smile while her brow arched. “Are you worried you’ll have to fight her next?” His lip curled and she heard Arya snicker.

“If he wants to get his ear bit off,” Sandor snarled, “let him. I don’t have to stick around and watch it. I’m going to go and check on your Smith boy,” he told Arya, “he’s working on something for me.” He sneered at the Lannisters that were standing too near. “And he’s better company.”

She waited until he had gone to lean closer to her sister. “She bit off his ear?” Somehow Sansa had not quite heard that part of the story.

Arya shrugged. “When you’re about to die you’ll fight dirty enough to live.” She glanced at her sister and grinned. “It was a really good fight.”

“What if he had killed her?” Sansa asked sharply. “Have you ever thought of that?”

“He didn’t. It’s fine.” Arya pulled herself up to sit on the wooden railing. “If he had… Lannister’s life would be a lot less interesting.”

He frowned as he watched the pair. He didn’t know if he liked the tone the other man had used. By all appearances, and his own time spent with the older man, Lord Selwyn appeared fond of his daughter. Still, Jaime had only his own experiences to draw from and Tywin Lannister was never very accepting or even remotely fond of his children. He stopped beside Lady Sansa and tapped his golden hand against his leg. “Should I…”

“You should not,” Sansa told him. Her chin lifted. “If Ser Brienne strikes you as someone who requires protecting then you do not know her near as well as you would have us all believe,” she said tersely. “You will wait, and you will watch. If you cannot do so, then I suggest you take yourself
Jaime scowled at Podrick when he bowed his head to hide his smile. “As if you are not as worried as I am,” he snapped at the younger man.

Brienne was standing with her own squire, and the boy, young Stevan, who was squiring for Jaime. She stopped mid-sentence as she corrected Jory’s posture and the grip the girl had on her wooden training sword to quickly reach up and catch the tourney sword when it was tossed to her. “Bad habits?” She scoffed at her father. “The only thing that has changed overmuch since the last time we sparred is the amount of grey in your beard. Think you are still spry enough?”

Selwyn pointed his sword at her as he circled toward the center of the training yard, his movements giving her a wide berth. “I think I’ve got more than enough in me to take the cheek out of you for that, little girl.”

Daven leaned past Lyle to look at Addam. His thick, golden eyebrows had climbed toward his hairline. “Little? Think we that the Stormlander has lost his eyesight with his years?”

“I think they grow them big on that island,” Addam jerked his chin toward the pair that were now circling each other. “He’s a full head taller, I think. I had not thought it possible. Lyle, are we sure you’re a Westerman? Seems to me you were misplaced, my friend.”

The taller man snorted. “I’m more Westerman than any of you miserable lot. Aye, he’s bigger, and I’ve seen him swing that sword.” His eyes glittered and beneath his thick, black beard, he grinned crookedly at their liege lord. “I think I much prefer the younger. I should send word for a formal audience.” His grin turned almost hawkish. “Or perhaps I will wait until the tourney and best you for the chance to ask the Lord of the Stormlands for her hand. One so skilled and honorable should have more options than a crippled old lion… and I’m prettier too.”

Jaime’s impulse to slap him with his golden hand was quickly tempered. He snorted at the other man. “Lyle, there is no realm of gods or man in which you will ever be deemed prettier than I am, even as crippled as I am.” He cut a look at his old friend. “And aren’t you four moons older than I am?”

Daven roared with laughter. “The Strongboar gives intent to steal his bride and it’s his vanity that’s wounded. I am gladdened to know you have not changed, coz!”

“Oh, he’s changed,” Addam smirked, “but he’s been knocked about the training yard a few times too many by his future goodfather. See how he moved with a limp? Let us hope the bruises are gone before the bedding, or his Lady will wonder what games he’s been about when she is not looking.”

He scowled at all of them, even as they laughed. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell them she had already been asking after those bruises, but Jaime thought better of it. His own lack of honor might have him in her bed, but he would not have her called a whore for his weakness. Jaime’s lip curled instead. “To the Seven Hells with all three of you. I’m of a mind to give Crakehall to Arya, she’ll need a place to anchor in the west. Lady Sansa, Ashermark is known for it’s many orchards. Perhaps I should make a gift of it to you.”

Sansa tilted her head and looked down her nose at him. “Lord Jaime, when I want your lands, I will come and take them from you.” Her pale blue eyes glittered like crystals. “And Ser Brienne will lead my armies.” His men laughed again while she folded her hands together in front of her and turned her eyes back to the sparring that was just beginning in the training yard. She thought she heard Jaime mutter something that sounded like “Cold Tully fish,” and fought to keep her lips from curling into a smile.
“Are you sure that you want to do this?” Brienne held her sword steady as she circled her father, eyes intent upon him. Her eyes gleamed, she was determined but competitive, and there was a part of her that was a bit giddy at the coming sword fight. It had been too long. Too many years had passed since the last time their swords clashed in the yard outside Evenfall. There was a part of her that was also concerned, he was older; there was more grey in his hair and beard, and she knew that it was worry for her as much as time that had increased the number and depth of lines around his eyes.

“When a fighter enters the field with me,” she continued, the corner of her mouth curving toward a confident smirk, “I do not go gentle because of handicap, or size, or age.”

His lips pulled back from his teeth in a hawkish smile. “Then show me, girl, do you still fight with the heart of a Stormlander, or have the praises of these Westermen and Northerners gone to your head?”

Brienne saw the strike when it came. The grip of his left hand on his sword had changed; ever so slightly that anyone who would not know to look for it would have missed it. Then the muscles of his shoulders and torso had tensed and rippled, but truly it was his eyes, and the way they darkened with the challenge. All of those things were part of her, an instinct that had grown with her since he had first placed a training sword in her hand and declared that if she was going to fight, she would do so correctly or not at all.

The metal sang as it met. Every strike and jab was met by one of her own, and her heart sang a joyous chorus to find that his hits did not lack in strength or intent. It was as she remembered, and as she turned and parried the rest of the yard fell away to be replaced by a smaller clearing, circled by a low stone wall. She could almost hear the cry of gulls, smell the clean and salty scent of the air that was tinged with pine and heather. She did not even pay notice to the crowd nearby. It might have been Ser Goodwin and the men-at-arms for all that her memory had taken her back. She was once again a girl of six and ten who had known grief and sorrow, but had not yet experienced the true darkness of the world.

It was an evenly matched dance and both of them were determined to win. Jaime knew her skill, knew her moves before she made them. He could feel the jolt of one particularly vicious strike in the bones of his own arm but Selwyn had hardly faltered and swept back with a hard strike of his own that was aimed at her legs, but even as Jaime grimaced, she easily dodged it. Her footwork was impeccable. Her body was lean and strong. He watched the stretch and ripple of muscles, his eyes tracked every move, every lunge, and despite the worry in the back of his mind, he felt his blood start to heat at the simple magnificence of her.

He was going to marry that warrior. She would be his. He would be hers. There was none that would ever part them.

Something sharp and hard dug into his side. Jaime’s head whipped to his right and he looked down to find Arya Stark beside him, looking as though she was ready to wield her bony little elbow against him again. She had shoved in between him and Addam and pulled herself back up onto the rail. “He’s not Tywin,” she said simply.

He met her scowl with his own. It was unsettling that she knew so much, more than he or Tyrion had shared. He supposed the world knew Tywin well enough to understand a man that would destroy whole families, support the violation of guest right, and try to rule the world with the cold, hard fist of ruthlessness was not a man that had ever bothered to approach his children as equals, much less join them at something they were good at because it was enjoyable. Jaime huffed a sigh and folded his arms across his chest. “I know that,” he grumbled.

Arya only snorted. She turned her head left and right; Westermen, the Lannisters and their
bannermen surrounded her. Her lips pursed and her brow arched. She had needle at one hip and her
dagger at the other, so she was not worried, but she was amused. “So then, five gold dragons on the
Lady of Tarth?”

They heard a brusque, “I am not a lady,” shouted back at them from between clenched teeth.

Jaime felt a grin tug at his mouth. She was not so lost to the fight that she wasn’t aware of her
surroundings. That was why she was better than the rest of them. “A fool’s bet, She-Wolf, there’s no
one here who will bet against her.”

“I’ll take the bet.” Bronn sauntered toward them, thumbs looped into the worn leather of his belt.
“You might be fuckin’ her, but the rest of us who aren’t, and aren’t tryin’ to push our heads up your
golden arse can spot an evenly matched set when we see it.”

“I’ll take your gold, girl.” Word of the upcoming tourney was starting to get out, as was the rumors
that the new great lords of the kingdoms had taken to gathering in the training yards at mid-morning.
House Tarth had been elevated over the Stormlands, and Ser Ronnet Connington had come to see
for himself how the big ugly bitch had managed that. He had heard rumors of the Kingslayer’s
Whore in the Riverlands; there were whispers of how the Kingslayer had met with her in his tent,
alone, and then let her in and out of Riverrun while he held it siege. The Knight of Griffin’s Roost
stopped near the rail. His lip curled in disgust at the display before him. “I see she’s still dressing as a
man, not that she ever looked much like a woman, eh Hyle?”

Hunt was like to agree, but managed a grimace where the others with them might have expected a
smile. He didn’t think this was the company for Connington to air his disdain, but Ronnet had never
been the smartest of fellows. “She fights well enough,” he said instead, finding a neutral topic. “She
beat us in the melee.”

“It was Loras that beat me,” Ronnet sneered at him, “not the beast from the island.” He nodded to the
slight bit of a girl that had called for the bet. “The ‘ol Lord of Evenfall has been trying to get rid of
his bad luck for years, he’ll beat her sound before he tosses her off on the Kingslayer.”

Every muscle in his body was bunched and ready for an attack. Jaime had dropped his arms to his
sides. The inside of his right wrist brushed against the hilt of Widow’s Wail and he wondered if the
foul mouthed jackass before them had given some woman the misfortune of being bound to him. He
thought he might gladly let the sword earn its name. He took a step forward, even as he felt his
cousin and men straightening around him. Jaime’s lips pulled back in a mean smile. He might not
even have to swing the blade himself, his bannermen would defend their Lady.

Before he could do more than take a half step forward, however, his vision was filled with a pool of
red. Sansa Stark, straight backed, hands clasped before her, and chin held proudly moved between
the Lord of Lannister and the newcomers. Ser Bronn she recognized well enough, from the
unfortunate encounters she had already had with the up-jumped sellsword. The other men were
unknown to her, and from the look on the sellsword’s face, he didn’t know them either, but his smirk
indicated he was anticipating a fight and would enjoy it. Tyrion truly had kept some unfortunate
company in his time.

“I do not believe we have had the fortune of having met, Ser.” The Lady of Winterfell’s voice was
filled with polite regard, but those who knew her felt the shift in the air and the chill of winter that
settled about her.

The woman before him was a vision in black. If he thought the black, plated and leather bodice was
unusual, the thought was swamped by the beauty of her willowy form, pale skin, and clear blue eyes.
Nor did he care that she had not offered her name, even as he bowed his head and planted a
winsome smile upon his face. “Ser Ronnet Connington, m’lady.”

“Ah yes.” Sansa’s head tilted. The name was familiar, but beyond a few whispered rumors she had
heard when the Tyrells arrived in King’s Landing with what remained of Renly’s army, she did not
know the man. “Of Griffin’s Roost, I believe. A small keep in the Stormlands.” She let her gaze
wonder over him before her eyes returned, dispassionately, to his face. “I understand now why we
have not met. I am Sansa Stark,” she told him, “the Lady of Winterfell and Wardeness of the North.”
She allowed that to sink in, and thought it might have if his faltering smile was any indication. Her
eyes narrowed. “I see you must have heard of me, Ser Ronnet.”

“Aye.” His lips turned down and his jaw clenched. The lumbering cow had made some important
friends since she left the Stormlands. He wondered if she was lucky or just more cunning than she
had ever let on. “I’ve heard of you. I was at court when you were wed to Tyrion Lannister, helped
him kill his King and his kin, as I heard it. Then you fled with Littlefinger to let your Lord Husband
take the brunt of the blame, that is what I have heard, Lady Stark.”

Behind her, Sansa heard Arya’s feet hit the ground. She heard a low hiss that she knew had come
from Jon, and the movement at her elbow belonged to the man who had sworn an oath to her mother
to see her safely returned to her family, and even now took position just behind her left shoulder
where her brave knight normally stood. Sansa’s eyes narrowed. “Ser Podrick,” she spoke to the man
at her right, “am I correct in recalling that the Knight of Griffin’s Roost was part of Renly
Baratheon’s host? That he lost the Great Melee at Bitterbridge to Lady Brienne of Tarth, who left the
knight, called Red Ronnet, laying in the dirt before she went on to best Ser Loras Tyrell and won the
honor of joining King Renly’s Rainbow Guard.”

“Yes, my lady,” Podrick glowered darkly at the man in front of them. “You are remembering that
correctly. I believe it was Queen Margaery who told the tale for you, when you and Lord Tyrion had
joined the Tyrells for dinner one eve.” His then Lord had recounted the tale for him later, over wine
and laughter, as he howled with glee at his brother’s
luck that his brother’s safety had been entrusted
to such a person.

“Hm.” The lady hummed as she recalled the memory of that evening. She had not been very good
company, as she was still mourning the loss of her mother and brother at the Red Wedding.
Margaery had told the story to lift her spirits, and those of others whose concerns seemed to center
more around her upcoming marriage to King Joffrey. “I believe that is correct, thank you, Ser
Podrick.” She tilted her head at the man before her. “Tell me, Ser, is it not true that upon Renly’s
murder, by his brother Stannis, you took your small host and joined Stannis Baratheon’s forces.
When Stannis was defeated at the Battle of the Blackwater, did you not then swear your fealty once
more to King Joffrey? I feel that was quite a lot of allegiances within a short time. Lord Lannister,”
his gaze did not waver from Connington, even as her head turned, just a fraction, toward the man on
her other side. “Ser Ronnet appears to find fault with the Lady from Tarth, but I do not recall her
loyalties being quite so fraught.”

“No, Lady Stark, they were not.” There was a bitter edge to his biting tone. The muscles of his back
and shoulders tensed while he refrained from reaching for his sword. “It was your mother, the late
Lady of Winterfell, who took Lady Brienne from Renly’s camp on the night that he was killed. After
seeing her safely back to the Stark camp, and obviously coming to know your Lady mother’s
reputation was hardly exaggerated, Lady Brienne swore her sword to your mother’s cause. Even
upon Lady Catelyn’s death, that oath did not falter.”

Sansa nodded once. “You are correct, my Lord, thank you. The Lady remains sworn to House Stark,
and has been my trusted shield and friend for some time. Though, I do feel we are being remiss. We
have not appropriately addressed our comments, would you agree, Lord Lannister?”

“I would.” His green eyes glittered like pale shards of jade ice. His teeth gleamed when he smiled meanly at the other man and drew himself to his full height, and he reminded himself that he was not that much shorter than the Lady Warrior he intended to wed. “Ser Brienne of Tarth was knighted on the eve of the Battle of Winterfell, just hours before the dead arrived. We would do well to remember that.”

“Indeed.” Sansa looked down her nose at the red haired man in front of her. “When you insult a Knight of Winterfell, Ser Ronnet, you insult the Lady of Winterfell. House Stark does not look kindly upon those who insult members of our household… or our family.” A single brow arched. “The Knight of whom you have spoken is not only sworn to my House, but she is kin to my brother, Jon Stark. I do not believe the Lord Protector of the Seven Kingdoms will much appreciate your words either. The North remembers, Ser, surely you have heard that? Further, she is the heir of Lord Selwyn of Tarth, who is Lord Paramount of the Stormlands, and betrothed to Lord Jaime Lannister, Lord Paramount of the Westerlands and Warden of the West. It is unfortunate for you, Ser, that you have in such a short time committed insult to so many.”

If he was at all concerned for his own well-being, Ronnet did not show it. His face flushed as his temper flared. What had become of the realm that women held themselves in such a way, that they thought to speak to their betters in this manner. He took a step forward and his lips thinned as his eyes sparked with fury. “If the big ugly bitch spread her legs for the Kingslayer and got herself a few titles and privileges better suited to a man, what care have I? So you call her a Knight, but I’ve heard her real title, aye, the Riverlands knows the truth of her. I’ve even heard told the sight of her face was so terrible Hoat’s bear cowered and refused to charge the bitch.”

Jaime might have charged him then, but another was in the way before he could. Bronn slapped a hand against the redheaded cunt’s chest and pushed him back a couple of steps. “Can’t say I’d call her a looker, but I’m not stupid enough to keep flappin’ my jaw in front of people who like the tall, blonde wench. That one,” he jerked his chin toward Jaime and grimaced. “Lannister might be a one-handed fucker, but he’s not a craven one, and having worked for the miserable shit, I could tell you all the times I’ve had to haul the idiot out of trouble because he charged first and had no good sense at all. So unless you want to learn how the Lannisters really pay their debts, I’d walk away friend.” Bronn kept his other hand behind his back, fingers curled around the bone-handled knife he always wore in the scabbard at the base of his spine.

They heard a deep and gruff, “Yield,” from the direction of the training yard. “Be sure to pay the Wolf her gold before you go,” Ser Lyle remarked easily. He was once more leaning against the wooden rail, relaxed as the Lady of Winterfell handled the business of her House and Knight.

Bronn looked over in time to watch the former Maid haul her Lord Father back to his feet. He shook his head. “Now the fucker is costing me gold instead of paying what’s owed,” he huffed.

“I think you lost that to your own poor choices,” Podrick remarked, a smirk spreading across his face. He would never have bet against his Lady-Ser.

Arya strolled around the group, hands clasped behind her back. “No need, right now. I will give them both a chance to win it back at the tourney.” Her smile, pleasant though it was, was a terrifying thing to behold for those who knew her. “I will take Ser Ronnet in the melee, and when I best him, I will have his gold.” She cut her eyes toward Bronn. “If I do not, you keep yours too.”

“I’m not stupid enough to bet against the Hero of Winterfell,” Bronn nodded. “I’ll take it.” It would give him a chance to pretty up his own purse in the process so he wouldn’t feel the sting of what he lost to her so keenly.
“Is there a problem, my Lady?” Brienne appeared at Sansa’s right shoulder, having easily and quietly taken Podrick’s place there. She had already assessed the situation, the scowl on Jon’s face and the tension in the set of Jaime’s shoulders. Ser Daven and Ser Addam stood alert, while Ser Lyle looked unbothered by the encounter, whatever it had been. Brienne’s eyes narrowed only slightly as she looked down at the familiar knight. She could feel her own shoulders tensing. She knew the man well, and could easily imagine what might have been said.

Sansa continued to gaze at Connington. When he said nothing, she decided that his brain must have finally caught up with his mouth. “None at all.” She turned to the pair from Tarth with a small smile. “Ser Ronnet arrived to present himself to the Lord of the Stormlands, and I thought it best to greet him. I know I have quite monopolized Ser Brienne’s time since we arrived in the city, and you’ve not had as much time with her as you might have liked. It was my way of responding to your kindness and understanding, my Lord. It is not only the Lannisters that can pay their debts.”

Jaime bowed his head, even as he grinned when she managed to turn the situation into a barb aimed in his direction. She was her mother’s daughter. “A lesson I would certainly expect a former bride of House Lannister to have learned,” he shot back, and gave a jovial little tilt of his head when she slanted a look at him. His eyes only crinkled with joy when Brienne scowled at him.

Lord Selwyn remembered the knight from Griffin’s Roost quite well. The boy had seemed a good choice once, but he had learned the error of his ways upon meeting the discourteous little grub. He stared down at the man, and knew well enough that Connington had spent more time sitting out of battles than taking part in them, and for no other reason than he had been waiting to support the victor. Selwyn had kept his island neutral for the safety of his people, and the defense of the shores they guarded, Connington could not boast the same.

“I think you for your kind regard, Lady Sansa,” he replied with a nod, though his gaze did not leave the glowering Stormlander. “It is most appreciated, though I think my old bones might have preferred the interruption. My master-at-arms, Ser Goodwin, is not as young as he used to be, and it has been some years since I found myself so easily put into the dirt. It was a good bout,” he nodded, “and the gods know I’ve been lacking for one of those. Now that Ser Ronnet has arrived, and we’ve more Stormlanders entering the city, I think my luck is going to change.” He strode forward. “Come along then, Ser, we’ve business to discuss.” Too many of the Lords and landed Knights that occupied the Stormlands had kept their own coffers and soldiers close at hand while the rest of the realm had struggled. The Stormlands was growing arrogant and wild, and that would stop before it became the lawless, ravaged land that the Riverlands had become.

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“I should be getting back as well, I think,” Sansa decided. “I don’t want to tarry away from the Keep too long,” she told Jon. “Bran should be arriving any day, I want to be there to greet him.”

“I’ll walk back with you,” Jon decided. “I have a meeting with Ser Davos in a little while.” The Master of Ships was still his closest and most trusted adviser. He wanted to strategize with the man in case Dorne and The Reach proved to be more difficult than they expected.

Sansa nodded before turning back to her knight. “I have Ser Podrick and Loren,” she told the woman, “please stay and continue your training with Lady Jory. I will take tea on my balcony. You may join me there.”

“My lady,” Brienne nodded in return. She waited until they had walked away before she turned back to the others. “Have you all nothing to do but stand about gawking? Jory, Stevan, back at it. Let us see what we can do about that poor footwork.”

“As much as I would like to stay and watch,” Jaime sighed, “the ledgers and correspondence are not going to sort themselves,” he told Daven. He had the replies that Brienne had helped him write and
he had yet to wrap his mind around the odd bookkeeping that his father and uncle had done. His
cousin appeared to understand it, but Jaime found it as illogical as an Ironborn attack on land.

“Aye, Coz, that is true. We should also discuss the incomes from Silverhill that we will need to
replace,” Daven told him. The Lord of the Reach had not yet arrived, but it was good to have a plan
in place anyway.

As he left, Jaime exchanged a look and a nod with Ser Addam and Ser Lyle. The two men would
stay behind to keep an eye on the training, and their future Lady, though she did not require their
protection she would have their assistance if it was needed. There were those, like Ser Ronnet, who
might wish to take issue with the Lady herself, but Jaime felt it more likely that there were far more
who might choose to make a move against House Lannister, now that it was at its weakest point in
more than three decades.

He would not take the risk, not when they had more enemies than allies.

-TBC-
He had been pacing for over an hour. Brienne gritted her teeth when she heard another sigh pass his lips and kept her attention pointed at the correspondence before her with steadfast determination. She could not give in. It was her acknowledgement of his mood that Jaime wanted, and she hoped that if she continued to ignore him, he might finally give up on his present sulking.

Experience told her that wouldn’t happen, but she was ever hopeful.

They had attended dinner with her father that evening, along with Ser Davos and a few other Stormlands Lords that had arrived in the city to swear fealty to both the new queen and their newly appointed Lord Paramount. Though Davos was always easy to talk to, and Brienne had known a few others from their time spent in her father’s hall when she was a girl, the conversation had been mostly uneventful and, in a word, boring.

The men had spoken of their lands and Keeps, and the state that the Stormlands was in after the recent wars and the fall of the Baratheons. Jaime’s presence was politely tolerated, for the most part, but Brienne knew that she had heard a few quiet mutterings of Kingslayer among the men. One of them, she was sure, had been Ser Ronnet Connington. The man had looked on them with barely concealed disdain, but in her father’s presence he had held his tongue, for the most part, and pretended to be on his best behavior.

Brienne heard Jaime sigh again but kept her gaze firmly upon the papers in front of her. He really could be such a child, but she was resolved to ignore him, at least for a little while longer. The letters she was writing were, she decided, more important than any pouting he intended to do. Her father had decided that it was time to begin including her in island matters again. She had been too long from her home, and he would not live forever. The people needed to remember that their lord had an heir.

In truth, it made her a little homesick. Maybe more than a little. She wanted to see Maester Steffon again, and speak with Ser Goodwin. She wanted to taste the pies of the old fisher wives and lay among the wild flowers of the high meadows. It was a keen ache in her chest, the memories that her thoughts evoked. For too long she hadn’t let herself think of such things, else fulfilling her oaths might have been even more difficult. Now it was as though that door inside of her had been opened and all the memories and emotions had come pouring out. She had a longing for home, for the cliffs and beaches, and the lullaby of waves crashing against the shore. It would be a year, at least, before she was able to see it again, but she reminded herself that she was a year closer than she had been even a moon before. It was inevitable, now, that she would return to her island, if only to visit. That was something to hold on to.

Movement from the corner of her eye caught her attention and Brienne lifted her eyes to watch Jaime make another circuit of the room. She watched him for a moment. He was a lion, caged and displeased, and spoiling for a fight he would not seek. Brienne rolled her eyes at him. She knew exactly what had prompted his ire.

Brienne shook her head and turned her attention back to the letter that she was writing. This one was to Ser Jaron, her father’s loyal steward. The man had been running Evenfall Hall for as long as she had been alive. Her father wanted an accounting of their food stores and what had been laid in for winter, during those months when sailing would become too dangerous in Shipbreaker Bay. She was
to ask that supplies be sent to the Riverlands, for those people who had been most ravaged by the 
wars, but Ser Jaron was only to send what could be spared. Their people could not suffer for their 
generosity.

“If you fight everyone who insults me, Jaime, you will spend the rest of your life with a sword in 
your hand and be most unhappy indeed.” She spoke finally, but only because she knew the longer he 
stewed the more like he was to do something foolish. “I would also remind you,” she said, “that I do 
not require your defense.”

_All my life men like you have sneered at me. And all my life I’ve been knocking men like you into the dirt._

He could recall, only too easily, the words she had spoken to him when he was first her captive, but 
Jaime’s lips still twisted into a mean sneer. “Just because you don’t require my assistance does not 
mean I am going to stand idly by while cunts like Connington do their very worst to try and hurt you 
with their words because they know they cannot do it with their swords. I notice he has no problem 
insulting you, but the coward wouldn’t dare challenge you directly.” He huffed another sigh and 
rounded a low, cushioned couch. “That is something I would truly like to see. It would be even more 
amusing than watching Sansa reduce him to ash with a few well placed words.”

It was Brienne’s turn to sigh. The other woman had been rather incensed at the behavior of the 
Knight from Griffin’s Roost. She had wanted to know exactly whom the man was and how it was 
that Brienne had come to know him. Sansa was scandalized that a man would behave so poorly 
upon meeting his betrothed, but thankful that her Knight had been freed of him, while Brienne had 
been humiliated in the retelling of it. It was not a moment in her life that she cared to think of. 
“Ronnet Connington is a landed knight and nothing more,” she said, instead of dwelling on it, “he 
has no power, no wealth, and no reputation of doing well in battle. The best he can hope for now is 
to be granted service by one of the Stormlands Lords and wed the daughter of a minor house. We 
cannot concern ourselves with his foul humors.”

Jaime grumbled unhappily at her advice. “I know how my father would have handled this insult. 
Perhaps I should engage Gendry’s help in the matter. The Lord of Storm’s End could send the 
Knight on an errand. I wonder how he would acquit himself in Dorne. The snakes may find him 
quite to their liking,” he sneered again.

“She has no power, no wealth, and no reputation of doing well in battle. The best he can hope for now is 
to be granted service by one of the Stormlands Lords and wed the daughter of a minor house. We 
cannot concern ourselves with his foul humors.”

Jaime grumbled unhappily at her advice. “I know how my father would have handled this insult. 
Perhaps I should engage Gendry’s help in the matter. The Lord of Storm’s End could send the 
Knight on an errand. I wonder how he would acquit himself in Dorne. The snakes may find him 
quite to their liking,” he sneered again.

“Lucky it is that we are not your father,” she replied, a hard edge to her voice. She glared at him for 
even suggesting that they stoop to the level of that vile, ruthless man to solve any of their problems. 
“Men like Ronnet Connington usually get precisely what they deserve, and even when they do not, 
they fade to nothing. If we attempt to destroy everyone who dislikes us, we will spend our lives 
fighting, plotting, and being as unhappy as the Ronnets of the world are cruel. I would much rather 
forget him.”

“I would believe that,” he drawled, “if you had actually managed to forget him at any point in your 
life.” Jaime walked over to tower above where she sat at the writing table, so carefully etching out 
her correspondence. The woman wrote more neatly than he could even recall his maester having 
done when he was a child. It was one more thing, he knew, that Brienne did well so that others 
would not find fault in her. “He is the measure by which you judge most people when you meet 
them. You expect the same cruelty, perhaps thinking you will be unsurprised when it comes, and 
despite all that you’ve accomplished, there are still shits like Connington in the world that will 
attempt to diminish that because they cannot hope to rise even a fraction to your level.” His eyes 
burned, the gold flecks in the green caught the candlelight surrounding her table and were set alight 
like dragon fire. “They should be taught soon and well that the Stormlands may abide that behavior, 
but the West will surely not.”
“Will it not?” She sat straight in her chair and turned toward him. Her eyes narrowed in response to his imperious tone. This was the man who had so often enraged her early in their association. He was arrogant and full of himself, and too much the creature that Tywin and Cersei had created. “Who was it that could not keep his mouth closed from one end of the Riverlands to the other? Was that you or some other poorly spoken wretch that I had the misfortune of escorting?”

Her words had that annoyed bite to them that told him that he had managed to get under her skin. It made his blood sing in response. It always had. Jaime leaned forward and wrapped the fingers of his left hand around the arm of her chair as he bent close. “Careful Wench,” he rumbled lowly, the words falling off his tongue in a slow purr, “you’ll lead me to believe you don’t recall the start of our courtesies as fondly as I.” The way her lips thinned into a straight line and she stared blandly back at him pulled a wide grin across his face. “Fine,” he caved, “but I’ll remind you that I was in chains and your captive. It was my duty to rile you into doing something foolish. It almost worked.”

Her lip curled. “It did not.” He might have annoyed her as no one ever had before, but she would not have given him the satisfaction of knowing that. “Ronnet Connington will learn to hold his tongue, or he will not, but just as I once ignored you, I will ignore him now. I will not allow him to think that he is able to affect my mood, my nature, or how I comport myself. He is nothing that requires my attention.”

Jaime’s lips pursed. “The fact that you are here now is proof enough that you were not able to ignore me even half as well as you want to believe,” his eyes glittered proudly, “so perhaps we can agree that you will most definitely not be ignoring Connington in the same fashion.”

Brienne huffed a sigh and shoved him away from her. “If you are going to be a menace,” she stated primly, even as she turned back to her letters, “then you can find your own chambers for the evening. I am busy.”

He rubbed his chest, where she had pushed him, with a grimace. “You would send me away for speaking the truth? What kind of knight are you, Ser?”

“The kind with no time for nuisances,” she replied, tone as bland as the parchment upon which she was writing. “If you need entertainment, I am sure that your brother would be willing to accommodate you.”

“If entertainment was all I was looking for,” he shot back, “I would have found it an hour ago.” Jaime hooked his left foot around the leg of her chair and using it and his remaining hand, he pulled her chair around so that she was facing him again. He bent over her once more, but his mood was far less jovial this time. “Your father taught you that words were wind, and mine insisted that we not listen to the opinions of our lessers, but that did not mean that those lessers were allowed to linger long where they might infect the masses with the cancer of their poor opinions. I do not think anyone despised my brother’s existence more than my father, not even Cersei, and yet any who would allow their slights against Tyrion to get back to Father were not long at the Rock. I am not suggesting that we murder Connington, though believe me I would not mind sinking a sword into that windbag, but some measure of remuneration would not be uncalled for.”

She drew a breath and let it out slowly. He was not going to let it go, apparently. Brienne scowled at him. “Is it not enough that Arya intends not only to best him at the tourney but to thoroughly humiliate him in the process?” She did not require anyone to fight her battles for her, but as to the youngest Stark daughter, it was a matter of honor and the girl could not be persuaded otherwise. It was both heartening and humbling to be so well regarded. Brienne gripped the quill in her hand.

How was it that this was her life? Yet, even as she felt awkward at being well loved by her friends
and peers, there were those like Connington to remind her that she was still the ugly girl who was little more than the ill-formed afterthought of the gods. Then there was Jaime, who looked at her as though she was something else entirely, and it was difficult to reconcile those two parts of her life. Would that her old Septa could be there to see the wrong in her proclamations. She might be too tall, too mannish, and too ugly by far, but there was at least one man who loved her as she was, all his annoyances aside.

“Arya Stark can do as she likes,” Jaime told her, “and I’m quite looking forward to the bout, but I fully intend to settle the matter myself. I think you, of all people, know why they say a Lannister always pays his debts. It has nothing to do with gold, and seeing as you are about to become one, dear Ser, it is time that Connington learned that lesson too. Besides, weakened as we are as a House, we’ll have no luck settling matters in the West or the Riverlands if we do not regain at least some part of our former reputation. Granted, my father went about it all the wrong way, but he was not always entirely misguided. He got a taste for power and liked it a little to well, to hear my Aunt Genna tell it, but that is all neither here nor there. Surely there is some middle ground to be found between my father’s ruthless nature, Cersei’s madness, and my grandfather’s gullibility.”

Brienne folded her arms across her chest and regarded him warily. His plots did not always end well, and this had the makings of another disaster. This was not a military campaign, for which he was so richly talented, but a matter of inter-house politics. He was better off leaving that to Tyrion or forgetting it entirely, but she supposed if he was actually going to take up the mantle as head of House Lannister, he was going to have to learn. She would prefer he found another subject upon which to hone his skills, however. “What exactly is it that you propose to do?”

She was resigned, which meant she would not stop him, and was tired of arguing the subject. It did not mean that she agreed or would assist him in any way, or would at any point save him later, but Jaime decided that he didn’t mind so much that she was only tolerating him. He had worn her down, that was enough. If it were Sansa, or Arya, or even Podrick that was at the center of his proposal, she would have agreed more readily, and that was exactly why he was not willing to allow the subject to drop. She did not hold herself with the same regard as the rest of them, or think herself to be of as much value.

He would have beaten the hell out of any man who thought to treat Myrcella so callously, and no one would ever convince him that Ellaria Sand had not gotten exactly what she deserved, and so Jaime could not understand how Lord Selwyn had allowed the freckle-faced, copper-haired piss-poor excuse for a knight to leave his island with his legs intact after the insult that had been paid his daughter in her own home. That was the part that Jaime thought might incense him the most. It had been done in the shadow of their Hall, in front of their household, so that the rest of their island might soon know of it. Now that he met the man himself, had experienced the poorness of the knight’s courtesies, and witnessed for himself the shallow regard with which he held others, Jaime could not fathom how Ronnet Connington had ever been considered a good match. The insult might be years old, but the Knight from Griffin’s Roost was still crowing about it, and that would not be allowed to stand… not in the Westerlands at least. Lord Selwyn could choose to rule the Stormlands with a gracious, just, and honorable hand, but Westeros would be reminded how well the lions protected their pride… not their power or their gold, which had been his father’s mistake, as well as his sister’s.

“He will be sent into the Riverlands as part of Ser Lyle’s host,” Jaime explained, “with the supplies and men that the Stormlands is lending to the cause. Ser Ronnet is going to find himself with every shit job that his commanders can think of, and every complaint, cross word, or twist of his face that is not a pleasant smile will find him feeling the weight of the Strongboar’s disapproval, which will be handed out with a reminder that the Lannisters send their regards.” Her lips turned down when she frowned at him and Jaime took that as an excuse to kiss her.
She pushed him away from her again, but this time she did not remain seated. Gaining those precious couple of inches that she had on him felt important in that moment… Almost as important as the way his eyes flashed and darkened when she stood over him. “You do recall that my agreeing to wed you does not mean that I am giving up my own identity? I am the heir to my own House and lands, a fact that will remain even after we speak the vows to join the two. I do not require you to humiliate that man on my behalf.”

“No,” He agreed, “you do not. Nor are you asking it of me. A lesser woman would have.” Cersei would have demanded it, and when he failed to do the task to her satisfaction, she would have found a way to punish them both. “Just because other people in your life were willing to stand by while you were hurt and humiliated does not mean that I am going to follow their example. I’d have hung any Septa that treated Myrcella the way you were treated, the Seven be damned, and I was willing to skewer the boy she was promised to and he actually liked her, think of what I might have done if he showed even a fraction of the ill manners that Connington has showed us both.” His brow rose and he tilted his chin, challenging her to disagree when he added, “You bristled every time we heard him whisper Kingslayer out of your father’s hearing, so do not pretend that you do not understand.”

Brienne rolled her eyes as she pushed past him. “Are you going to send every man that insults me to Ser Lyle for punishment? Perhaps I should wed him instead and save us both the trouble.” The fingers that caught her wrist and tugged her back squeezed tightly. She may be larger and stronger but he was not entirely without the ability to acquit himself against her, no matter how often he allowed himself to be beaten into the dirt by her father because he would not fight back with the fervor that she knew he possessed out of respect and care for her.

“He would have you if he thought he could,” Jaime grumbled, “so do not jape about such things, or I will feel compelled to fight even my own friends.” His lips turned down in a pout. “Even Daven would challenge me for you, if not for the fact that he knows you would knock him into the dirt for suggesting it. Half the Westermen in my army are already half in love with you, the Northerners are threatening to invade the Stormlands to see if there are more like you, and do not get me started on your fucking wildling.” His eyes flashed with pure irritation at the thought of that redheaded menace. “What is it with the copper-haired fools where you are concerned?”

“I really could not say,” she huffed with aggravation. “The Northmen prefer honesty and strength, but when I have been gone from their lands for a few moons, they will remember they like their women to demure to their egos. The Westermen seek only to win favor with their new lady. The novelty will wear off soon enough and they will stop attempting to rile your jealousies with their mocking. My looking glass reminds me of the truth as often as I can stand to see it, so what would you have me say, Jaime? We had this conversation, and I believe I warned you quite well that the world does not see what you do. I thought we had agreed to ignore all of that?”

“This is different,” he told her. “The man, if anyone can call him that, is going out of his way to be discourteous. He has realized what his misplaced vanity has cost him. He could have been wed to you long ago, with heirs a plenty, and find himself in line to inherit the entirety of your island and your father’s titles. His stupidity cost him that, and instead of blame himself, he chooses to put the blame upon your shoulders.” Jaime tugged on her arm again and pulled her closer. “What you see in the looking glass is the reflection of every ill word that has been spoken by hateful, small minded, fools who were never worthy of shining your boots, much less having the opportunity to serve you in any fashion. Do not tell me that it never wounded you that your father did not defend you. You’ve never lied to me, or anyone, do not start now.”

“He taught me to defend myself,” she said tightly. “I can fight my own battles, and you well know it. I repaid Ronnet for the insult at Bitterbridge, and the men in Renly’s camp who were like him joined him in the dirt during the melee. I have fought and I have won, and I will do so again. I do not
require your help.” His hold on her wrist had loosened, but she let him slide his other arm around her waist. The golden prosthetic was cold and hard against the middle of her back, a reminder of another time he had insisted upon aiding her. Her hands rested upon his shoulders with a sigh. “I will not use you to fight my battles,” she said quietly.

“It is not using me if I have offered,” he said simply. “Brienne…” His jaw clenched for a moment. “Why must you be so stubborn? Why can you never give, even an inch, to allow someone to help you? I know that you are strong. I am not implying otherwise, nor would anyone who truly knows you. Would you allow anyone to treat Podrick in this manner? What of your own child? Should I have stood by while Tyrion was taunted as a boy? I do not mean to fight the entire world, I have neither the patience nor the energy to spend upon the sheep, but the snakes… those like Connington who choose to slither about and spread their poison will find their fangs removed soon enough.”

She could not fault his reasoning or disagree with him, not when presented in that particular light. That did not mean that she enjoyed being at the center of it all. “Do as you must,” she relented with a shrug, “but do not expect me to have any part in this.” It was a matter of pride and loyalty, but it was also another form of inter-house politics that she preferred to ignore, at least so long as she was able. When she tried to pull away from him, he only held her tighter. Brienne sighed. “Jaime.” His face twisted into a pout and she rolled her eyes. “Do not ask me to enjoy this, please.”

It was not in her nature, he knew that well enough. “No,” he said, “I would not, but should you enjoy watching Arya make a pulp of him, I do not think anyone would fault you for it. I intend to enjoy it well enough.” He tilted his head to the side and let his gaze slide down her form. “Speaking of tourneys and bouts, how badly can I expect to be beaten?”

The corners of her mouth twitched. “Wear the tall black boots, they will help protect your knees,” she warned.

“I was afraid of that.” His brow furrowed toward a frown. “I don’t suppose you could be persuaded to go easy on me? I am old and crippled.”

She pushed him away from her with a snort. “Wagstaff was five and sixty and I sent him away with broken bones. Do not think to bargain with me, Ser. I will not throw the bout to protect your ego.” Nor would she need to. He would do well enough on his own… before she eventually bested him. Brienne turned back to the table, intent upon completing her correspondence.

“Yes, but if you wound me too badly how can I ever be expected to perform appropriately after the tourney.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and laid his chin atop her shoulder. “You know, the whole day isn’t just about our five minutes on the lists. Try not to be too violent.”

“I will do no such thing.” She pressed her lips together to suppress the smile, but her eyes crinkled with amusement, even as she kept her gaze firmly upon the letter she would have to rewrite later. The quill had been drawn across the parchment when he pulled at her chair. Brienne sighed. He truly was a nuisance at times. He nuzzled her neck and she sighed at the tickle of his whiskers against her soft skin. Perhaps she would make him write it for her, that would be a suitable diversion for his pent up energies, and he could use the practice. The playful nip of his teeth against the crook of her neck made her shiver and sigh. “I am busy,” she told him.

“So am I.” His lips curved into a smile when she grunted at him. Annoying her was his favorite hobby. His tongue traced the shell of her ear and he quickly amended that thought: second favorite hobby. His hand splayed across her stomach while he pressed against her back. She was warm, solid and his. How could she think that he would stand aside while anyone tried to hurt her? However much she might be able to defend herself or fight any battle, it did not mean she would do so alone. If he had to remind her that every day, he would, and one day she would believe he meant to fight
with her, not for her.

She covered his hand with hers and squeezed gently. “You could call down for hot water to be brought up for a bath,” she told him. “By the time it is ready, I should be finished.” Brienne drug her teeth across her bottom lip. “If you think you can find either of your squires,” she teased.

Jaime huffed at her. “I see so little of them I can hardly remember either of their faces.” He pressed another kiss to her neck before he pulled away with a sigh. “Did you have to go and knight Podrick like that? He wouldn’t leave us abandoned all day and all night, forced to fend for ourselves. This morning I had to fetch my own boots.”

She folded her lips together at the utter outrage in his tone. “That was terrible for you, I know.” Brienne cast a look at him from over her shoulder. “Think how much better equipped you will be to train the next squire once you have managed to make something out of these two.”

His eyes widened into a look of abject terror. “You mean I have to do this again? They’re terrible. Both of them! They’re never around when I need them, and I am almost certain my brother is paying them to disappear at the most inopportune moments.”

“Oh my god.” She looked away from him with a groan. Brienne turned and leaned a hip against the table while her arms folded across her chest. “How did you manage to make it all the way north, by yourself, without having anyone to look after you, you absolute child.”

“Oh, that was easy.” He flashed his most charming smile at her. “I spent most of the time thinking about you.”

Her face softened into a fond smile, but she sighed at him. “Summon a maid and send for the bath. The hour grows late and patience for your delays grows thin.”

The haughty lilt of her tone was almost worthy of Casterly Rock. He smirked at her. “Are you going to be this bossy after we’re wed, woman?”

“No, I intend to be worse.” She turned her back to him again. “Now hurry along. I haven’t all night.”

Jaime grinned as he left her sitting room. His step became all the more jaunty when he considered what his father might think of the Lord of Casterly Rock sent off to do the bidding of some woman. Perhaps he should fetch some wine while he was at it.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters for the price of one since I had more time to edit this weekend. One thing about our darling Lord Selwyn that I've never liked is how he just let his daughter be treated that way. Jaime doesn't like it either, besotted fool that he is.

The bit about the Northmen invading the Stormlands to find more women like her comes from a book I read a long time (decades) ago. I cannot remember who wrote it, but it was a historical romance where the English heroine ends up in the Highlands, and at the end, the Highlanders go to England to find more like her. Though I can't remember which book it is for the life of me, I shamelessly borrowed it, because why
not! They'd all be lucky to have a Brienne. Haha!
“You will need to organize the guard when you are not with Lady Sansa. There should be a second with you, if you are not inside the Great Keep, and a third if you take her outside Winterfell’s walls.”

Brienne had asked Podrick to meet with her once she had finally managed to accept that she would not be returning North with Lady Sansa and the rest of the Stark host. She knew that Podrick would already know much of what she was telling him, but guarding Sansa had been largely her responsibility. Podrick had known her daily routine, but as her squire he had his own duties to attend during the day, and so he had mostly only accompanied her and Lady Sansa when they were outside of Winterfell.

“I will be with her in the morning and late afternoon,” Podrick nodded, repeating what he knew of Ser Brienne’s habits while they had been in the north. “She will break her fast before I arrive, and another guard will stand at her door for the midday meal…” He smiled knowingly at his Lady-Ser, “unless she chooses to take it in the Great Hall, which is where she will probably have her supper. She will only expect me at her side for those meals if there are visitors in Winterfell, otherwise the time is my own.”

She looked up from the correspondence that she was reviewing while they talked. Jaime had letters to send but his writing was not what it needed to be and he’d asked her to help him with the task, something she felt she would likely be doing a lot of in the future as his Lady Wife. Brienne fixed her former squire with a long, unwavering look. “At some point throughout the day you will also need to train yourself, the children, inspect the armory, and take your turn at watch on the walls near Lady Sansa’s quarters.”

Podrick almost winced at the hard bite in her tone. “Yes, my lady. I never thought I would be replacing you, but I won’t let you down, I swear it.”

Any other time, and on any other subject, Brienne might have allowed a small smile at his earnest response. His words felt like a blow, however, and she inhaled sharply at the painful clenching of her stomach and the tight pressure in her chest. She had known, in some far off and abstract place in the back of her mind that she would one day need to leave her Lady. It was expected that she would return to Tarth and take her place on the island as the Lady of Evenfall Hall. Brienne had been her father’s only heir for most of her life, and for as long as she could recall, her duty was clear.

But she left her home. She left her island for the sake of duty, and glory, and the chance to prove herself to those who would judge her and find her lacking on the basis of her looks. She found her own place in the world, and somewhere along the way it ceased to matter if others underestimated her ability to fight, or if her face and body were displeasing to look upon. Her honor and her oaths had been what mattered. She’d had Podrick, and somehow he believed in her when so few others did. It was so very annoying at first, and she was determined not to like him, to find fault in him. Then she realized she was no better than those who found fault in her, and his steadfast loyalty and optimism had found its way inside the high walls she built around herself. His presence had become important to her. She didn’t want to let him down, either.

Then they had found Sansa, and they saved her. Suddenly protecting that wounded and frightened child had become more important than any oaths she had sworn. Sansa’s strength had reminded her of Lady Catelyn, and along the way she stopped thinking about her home, and her duty, and
classified those responsibilities as being years into her future.

That began to change when Jaime had come north, and in his utter and complete insanity he had chosen her. *Her.* Of all the people and choices that he had before him, she had become the one thing that he could not do without, and suddenly all of those things she thought were so far in the future were much closer than she ever imagined. She knew the very first time he whispered against her skin, his eyes dark with desire and passion, that he would always be hers that she would have to make a choice. She knew it the first morning she woke with his arms wrapped around her as though he thought she might leave him in the night, and she had known it when he left her. Every day they were apart the choice she would have to make loomed ever nearer, and she had known she would feel pain whatever her decision.

“You are not replacing me, Podrick,” the words cracked through the room, harder than any whip, even as her mouth twisted toward a sneer in her displeasure. “I am simply going to be absent for a time.” That was an easier lie to believe than the truth that was staring her in the face. By the gods! She was writing out his correspondence for him, and just that morning she had sat with his cousin, Ser Daven, to review the ledgers the other man had brought with him from Casterly Rock. They were not yet even wed and already she was spending more time away from her duties to Lady Sansa than she was actually protecting the younger woman.

“My lady,” Podrick’s voice was gentle, and the smile that he offered her was both sad and filled with compassion. “Ser.” He looked down for a moment and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “You will not return to Winterfell often, I think,” and somehow he doubted she would return at all. At least, not for some years. Podrick thought it more likely they would only see each other again in King’s Landing, when it was necessary for the Wardens to take part in Council matters. He looked up again and his dark eyes were wide with understanding. “It is okay, there is no harm or dishonor in fulfilling your duty to your own House. We always knew you’d be needed at home one day, and right now you’re needed in the West. You’ll like it there, I think. It’s warmer than Winterfell, and I’ve heard the winter snows never blanket the coast of the Sunset Sea.” His smile warmed as he recalled the lands of his early childhood, before his father died and his mother left him. “There are golden beaches by the water, and tall mountains on the inland with deep green valleys, greener than anything you’ve ever seen. Near Crakehall there are trees as tall as the eye can see and wider than a wagon. It’s a beautiful place, if not always a happy one. You’ll change that, and someday people will be glad and proud to say they are from the Westerlands.”

Brienne looked away from him. She almost could not bear it. Her jaw pressed tightly together and she lifted her eyes toward the heavens when they grew moist at his heartfelt words. “You’re starting to sound like Ser Jaime,” she managed, in a tight and almost croaking voice filled with too much emotion.

“He’s not always stupid,” Podrick said, and a small grin turned the corner of his mouth upward. “He picked you.”

She had to close her eyes, and she wanted to admonish him, but she couldn’t find it in herself to do so. “Pod.” She looked at him instead, and for just a moment all the fondness that she felt for him was written across her too plain features. She looked away again a moment later and turned her eyes to the quill she was picking at. “You will need to mind her schedule,” she said quietly, more gently than before, “there will be those that want to take advantage. Sometimes protecting Lady Sansa means shielding her from the overly aggressive demands of others. Maester Wolkan will insist on taking up half her morning, the tanners and the smiths will want her afternoons. Even when you do your best, sometimes there is still too much. When she’s had enough, or she needs a break, she will ask you to send down to the kitchens for lemon cakes.” Brienne smiled sadly, “there aren’t any, it is a luxury that cannot be had in winter, but that is the signal we have used when she would prefer to be alone.”
“I wondered about that.” It was something he heard Sansa ask for, once, just after the Starks reclaimed Winterfell. He had never asked, because he sensed he should not. “You took night watch at her door too, didn’t you? I thought there were evenings you were not relieved until almost sunrise.”

“I did.” She focused on the parchments spread out before her and tried not to notice how the lines blurred on the papers. “You will find there are nights when she does not sleep well. She will ask you to stand guard on those nights because she trusts you more than most. You will hear her cry out, but do not react unless she specifically calls for you. She does not like to appear weak, especially not in response to her dreams.” Prior to the Long Night months had passed since the last truly terrible nightmares had plagued her Lady, but then the dead had come, and Theon had died, and Brienne had spent more nights standing at Sansa’s door than with Jaime in her bed. It had not lasted long, and once those first hard nights had passed, the dreams began to fade again.

“I was not aware.” Podrick’s brow furrowed in concern, “You have guarded Lady Sansa’s secrets well. I hope I can be even half as brave or honorable.” He shrugged and his smile was all self-deprecating. “I hope Lady Sansa can learn to trust me as she did you. Perhaps it will not be so difficult,” he suggested, ever hopeful and optimistic. “King Jon, er—I mean, Lord Stark will be remaining in King’s Landing with the Queen. Lady Arya and Lord Gendry are going, well, I am not entirely sure where they are going. I don’t think Lord Bran intends to return north, not for a while yet, or else he wouldn’t have come. It will be odd, I think, only knowing Lady Sansa.”

Brienne’s eyes widened. She had not thought of that. A wave of guilt so thick it nearly stole the breath from her chest washed over her when she realized that she would be leaving her Lady largely alone. Podrick had not been wrong when he said that she would probably not return to Winterfell often. After the Queen’s coronation they had planned to return to the Westerlands with the Lannister host. Jaime would need to take his place at Casterly Rock. There would be Lords to be gathered, and a Council to be called of Houses Marbarnd, Swyft, Lefford, Banefort, and Brax to name but a few. They would have to make certain their people had prepared for winter, and then there was the Riverlands to be dealt with. A host would need to be taken into that troubled land to bring peace and food enough to survive the cold months to come. It would take time, they knew, and Jaime had planned to accompany the host, at least for a while. Then they had talked of going to Tarth, possibly in a year’s time, if the weather did not make travel too difficult. She had been too long away from her home and should present herself and her Lord Husband to her people before necessity placed the mantle of Evenstar upon her shoulders.

With all that needed to be done it would be years before she saw the North again, though the journey would be simple enough. Brienne thought to sail to Saltspear, and then travel north to Torrhen’s Square. It was not so difficult a ride to Winterfell from there, but she wondered if she would recognize the North by the time she saw it again. Likely she would only see Lady Sansa and Podrick when their duties to the Small Council brought them all to King’s Landing. Brienne did not imagine that would happen often, once per year, to handle those matters that could not be settled via raven or royal messenger.

She had not wanted to think it, but every word that Podrick spoke, though she knew he meant no ill will was peeling back every layer of denial that she had built around herself, until only her practical side remained to remind her of the duty she was abandoning. It was an abandonment, surely, what else could it be? It was not duty that was pulling her from her Lady’s side. Her father was well, and hearty, and whole. She would likely not be needed on Tarth for some years, and while an heir was still needed, there were other ways she could go about that. She did not have to leave Lady Sansa to wed. There were minor lords and landless knights that would be elevated well enough by her titles and holdings, and would not even mind having to look upon her face or touch her broad, mannish body.
Perhaps there was even one from the Westerlands that would follow her north, though she thought Jaime surely a fool for going on about such things.

It was nothing more than the desires of her heart that were turning her attention westward. She did not have to marry Jaime, but she had chosen him, and she wanted him. It was selfishness and only that which would leave her Lady alone, abandoned by family and friend and protector. If she changed her mind, if she asked her father to rescind his agreement to the betrothal, she could return north. But she would do so alone. Jaime would not follow her, no matter the teasing they received from his brother or Arya Stark. He would return to Casterly Rock without her, and while it may not be what he would want, it is what his honor would demand.

“Seven hells,” she muttered. She had managed to create quite a mess for herself, for all of them, actually.

“Are you alright, my Lady?” Podrick tilted his head and looked on her with concern. She had gone a bit pale and even her eyes seemed to have lost their usual color, seeming to look more like a cloudy, winter sky than the waters for which her island was named. “Ser?”

She opened her mouth to respond, but there was no sound to be made. All that Brienne could hear was the echo of her lady’s words in her mind when she had told her of the decision that had been reached for her to wed.

There was concern in Lady Sansa’s eyes as she looked upon her most trusted protector. They had gone for a walk in the gardens the morning after their arrival in Winterfell. Sansa had felt the ghosts there of times past. She could still hear the bite of Lady Olenna’s tone as she imparted wisdom, sarcasm, or insults upon the Lannisters. She could hear the musical sound of Margaery’s laughter, and the foreign lilt of Shae’s advice. There were ghosts in the gardens, but she felt safe with Brienne. She always did. It was worry that she felt now, however.

“Are you sure? I know that you are… fond of Ser Jaime,” Sansa said carefully, “but if this is not what you want, Brienne, then I will not have it. I will keep you at my side and settle the matter with your father.” She would not allow the older woman to be sold in marriage against her will, and certainly not to a Lannister, not if she could help it.

Brienne sighed. “I think we are both quite aware that it went beyond simple fondness sometime ago, my Lady.” Her hands were clasped behind her back as they walked. Her gaze swept the hedges and the path in front of them, though the garden seemed safe enough. “I had not thought to wed at all, if I am honest about it. Any interest I might have once had in the idea was pushed from my mind after two disastrous betrothals.” There were also the attitudes of the men she had met in her travels and her own awareness of her visual shortcomings. “There aren’t many men I respect enough to even consider it,” she remarked, tone laced with disdain for the majority of that sex.

“You love him.” It was not a question, Sansa knew well enough of what she spoke. She had witnessed the affection between them. It was quite confusing to her, because she could never imagine trusting any man enough to feel something so strongly for him, and certainly not Jaime Lannister of all men. “I will confess that he is changed from how I remember him, and I did not expect him to honor his promises but he has. I do not think that I will ever forgive him,” she stopped walking and faced the other woman. “But I know what he did for me. I would not have you if he had not sent you to me. I would be dead now, or worse…” For she knew, better than most, that there were some fates that were worse than the grave. She could still be at the mercy of Ramsay Bolton, his child at her breast and another in her belly, all while Theon cowered in a corner and Rickon wasted away in a dungeon… or was flayed in front of her. “I believe he loves you, too, in so much as he is capable of
loving. But I ask you again, do you want this?"

“The gold and industry would be good for Tarth,” she said. “My father would be able to ship food into our port from Essos. The surplus would be available for the Stormlands. There would be work that the men of my island could be proud of, even if it takes them West, and the women need not worry that their children will go hungry. This is what my people need, and though I did not expect it, there is the added advantage that you would have an army to call if ever the need should arise.”

“Brienne.” Her clipped tone held a warning. Sansa might be her friend, but she was still her Lady. She would have her question answered.

She took a step away, pacing in her agitation. Brienne closed her eyes for just a moment before rolling them and huffing an exasperated sigh. It was easier to admit it to Jaime, who knew her so well, and who needed her assurances as much as she needed his. “Gods help me, but I do. I have chosen Ser Jaime, for good or ill, though I oft wondered if I ever had a choice at all. I just had not expected to leave you so soon.”

“You are not leaving me.” It pained her, but she was happy for the other woman too, if not confident of her choice. Sansa moved forward and took her knight’s hands in hers. They were larger, calloused, and strong. They could be gentle too, and had been when the other woman had cared for her wounds following her escape from Ramsay. “I will not release you from your vows. You may not be at my side as you are now, but I will have Ser Podrick, whom you have trained well. I told you before that you would always have a place with me, and I meant it. If I have need of you, I know that I need only call and you will come.” Sansa forced back the well of her own emotions and allowed a small smile to grace her lips. “Just think how livid Cersei would be if she knew you were bringing the whole might of the Westerlands to my aid.”

“I could not think of a better revenge,” Brienne admitted, “than to see you gain all that she has lost.” Her brow furrowed with determination as she added, far more seriously, “the deepest snows of winter could not keep me away, I swear it.”

“I know.” Sansa’s expression softened into one of fondness. “You would never leave my side if I asked it of you, but that I will not do. You have shielded my back and guarded my secrets, and I would not be worthy of your protection if I did not care for you even half as well. My mother could not have chosen better for me than one such as you, and I stopped praying long ago but I would hope that wherever her spirit ended up she knows how well you have served us both.”

Those words, so softly spoken and so easily given meant more to her than she could say. Brienne looked down for a moment, when the feelings they provoked made her eyes sting and her vision blur with moisture. For a time, fulfilling that oath had been all that kept her going and thoughts of failure had rendered her frozen and unable even to breathe for the pain seized her chest when she allowed them to invade her mind. “She would be proud of you,” she managed after a moment, her own voice thick with emotion.

“Of you too, I think.” Sansa gave her hands a squeeze before she let them go and took a step back. She folded her hands in front of her and drew a breath while they both composed themselves. “I cannot say that I will ever fully understand your choice, but it is not for me to understand it to respect it. You have my leave, Ser Brienne, to remain with your husband and your new House when I depart for Winterfell after the Queen’s coronation. You will be missed, but I know that there is much good that you can do for your family and your people.”

Brienne straightened at the return to formality. “Thank you, my Lady. I am grateful for your kindness.”
Sansa nodded and they began walking again. “I suppose,” she said, and sighed as she managed to draw upon the patience to speak her next words, “that there must be some good in him.” She slanted a look to her left and the corner of her mouth quirked upward, if for only the briefest of moments. “He chose you.”

“After a lifetime of poor choices,” she drawled, with no small amount of sarcasm, “he was bound to get one thing right.”

The women shared a smile as they continued their walk through the gardens.

When Brienne’s thoughts cleared she found Podrick still staring at her with a good deal of concern. She shook her head at him. “I am fine,” she said more calmly. “It is just as you said, leaving will be difficult.” She huffed a sigh, though she managed a small smile for him, “you are quite annoying, but I suppose I have grown fond of you.”

His shoulders slumped in relief and returned her smile. “I don’t know what I’ll do without you to knock me in the dirt all the time. Who will tell me my footwork is all wrong?” He knew her doubts, knew how hard she was on herself, and Podrick hoped that she would be happy, truly, once everything had been settled. She deserved it, more than most people he knew, but he also knew that if he said anymore on the matter she would probably hit him.

“I will be sure to send a raven once a week,” she rolled her eyes at him. “You will do fine, Pod. Remember your training and try not to fall back into any of your poorer habits, and for the love of the gods, stay away from Ser Bronn!” Brienne scowled at him. “There is no good that can come from that association and I do not like the way he looks at Lady Sansa.”

Podrick felt like groaning in response but thought better of it. “I will be sure to keep a close eye on things and I doubt we will see much of each other. The Dreadfort is many leagues to the east, with the snows and the colder temperatures, I do not think he will travel to Winterfell often…” A sly grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. “If he survives the first hard snow. Ser Bronn likes his comforts.”

“Yes, I do not doubt he does,” she muttered. He was a bad influence on Podrick, crude and coarse, and she would not forgive his attempt on Jaime’s life anytime soon, nor how he had blackmailed the Lannister brothers in exchange for their lives. Hard as she tried, because she thought the brothers might be fond of him, she could not find any redeeming qualities in the man at all. “Lady Sansa still needs to put the idea to the Queen. My hope is that he will realize how futile his attempts at gaining a castle he has not earned are and give up the idea. With any luck he will simply find elsewhere to be. Should that not prove to be the case… If I hear of anything untoward happening I will be most displeased,” she warned.

“I understand, Ser.” Podrick smiled again and felt better when her scowl only deepened. Whatever had upset her had passed and she seemed more like herself again. “I expect he will enter the tourney, perhaps I will have the chance to show him how well we fight in the North.”

While she knew her former squire could not best the other man, she knew Podrick would fight well and likely get some good hits in before he was beaten. Brienne nodded. “That I will look forward to watching, but first…” They still had much to discuss.

Podrick straightened and turned his mind back to matters of guarding their Lady and taking care of her daily needs. His Lady-Ser was leaving behind some very large footprints for him to fill, and he knew it would be years yet before he even came close to serving half so well as she had done. He would not let her down, though, that was a vow he made to both of them, even if he did not give
Apologies for the delay. Work has gone crazy on me. This chapter hurt to write, but maybe that's just me. I keep trying to think of ways to keep Podrick with his Sers, but I just can't imagine Brienne being able to leave Sansa without knowing she's protected, and who better than the squire she raised/trained/shaped. Love me some Pod!
“Have you ever just wanted to kill him because he talks so much?”

The question had come from Daenerys, and she looked almost surprised at herself to have voiced it. It was the third day that she had spent her afternoon cloistered with her cousin and Jon’s sisters while they talked of plans for the wedding tourney, rule of the kingdoms, and whatever other topics might arise during the time they were together.

If the men found it worrisome, they were wise enough not to voice it. The fruit of their discussions had been issued in the form of orders that Daenerys had sent to Jon in written form. The tourney was to be planned, with banners and notices sent where they could be in winter. It meant delaying the marriage vows for ten days, as that was how long it would take for a host to arrive from Casterly Rock. The Queen had decided House Lannister and House Tarth would share the cost of the tourney purse, and both Lords needed to request the funds be brought to them.

Feeding the smallfolk was another matter that was discussed among them. Requests and the orders for the movement of grain, livestock, and other harvest yields were sent into The Reach, the Westerlands, and the Stormlands, all areas that had not been so ravaged by the wars for the Throne. They would need to know the store of coffers for villages and farms, and smaller keeps throughout the southron regions.

It became easier to get the answers they required when Bran arrived. Though there were fewer weirwood trees in the south, once he had rested and no longer had the strain of traveling upon his body, he was able to more easily touch his powers. It was not as easy as it had been at Winterfell, or north of the wall, but his abilities remained if he was able to concentrate. Sam accepted the position of Master of Coin, and seemed the only person that could make sense of the ledgers left behind by Petyr Baelish and Qyburn. Cersei had not given all of the gold taken from Highgarden to the Iron Bank, they learned, and managed to uncover where it had been hidden; it became a debate then of what to do with that gold. Daenerys pondered giving it back to House Tyrell, while Sansa argued that it could be used to fortify the city and more far reaching kingdoms. Brienne settled the impasse the two women reached. The debts of House Lannister could not all be paid in gold. The crown would keep what was already seized and use it to benefit the realm.

They had not met on consecutive days, due to their own responsibilities and the knowledge that they just could not bear it. It was becoming easier, however. Daenerys and Sansa had concentrated on acquiring civility toward one another, while Brienne was stoic and courteous and Arya was… Arya.

They had been talking about the previous day’s court happenings. The Queen had listened to petitions and taken counsel before passing judgment and making decisions. The formal announcement of the tourney had also been made, though rumors of it had already spread through much of the Keep and city beyond. The Unsullied and the Dothraki would be permitted to compete as well, though that seemed to scandalize the knights and lords of the Seven Kingdoms. The Warden of the West had found the complaints of the younger knights and minor lords to be amusing, and had allowed everyone present to know his thoughts.

Daenerys’s eyes widened as the words left her mouth. She looked at the other women before finally shrugging. She could not always hide her disdain, so why attempt to do so? Perhaps Jon and his northern ways were beginning to rub off on her.
Despite Arya’s smirk and Sansa’s astonishment, Brienne considered the question honestly. She was standing in the center of the room, arms held from her sides while two seamstresses and a maid moved around her, measuring and fitting and marking adjustments. Gendry was still working on the armored pieces that would adorn her, and they expected it to be some days before his work was complete, but the rest of the outfit was underway. “Not since I became adept at ignoring him,” she replied, “though there were days early in our… acquaintance when I thought about sewing his mouth closed, despite my lack of talent with that skill.”

“Acquaintance?” Arya grinned. “Is that what we’re calling it now? I thought it was fucking.”

“Arya.” Sansa wondered how many people it would take to actually throttle her sister and if she might convince Brienne to do the deed. She huffed a sigh. “Not in mixed company, please.” She cast a pointed look at Jorelle, who might be a squire but was still a young, unmarried, highborn lady.

“You needn’t concern yourself with my sensibilities, my Lady.” Jorelle shrugged. “I already know what they’re doing in Ser’s bedchambers.”

That might well be, but Sansa scowled at both of them and wondered if they couldn’t see the bright red flush that was spreading up Brienne’s neck to her cheeks or if they just didn’t care. “That doesn’t mean it should be discussed,” she admonished.

“Why?” Arya turned where she was seated on a cushioned bench to straddle it and face her sister. “Brienne was the one that not even half an hour ago told them not to bother shaping the corset to look like she had bigger tits because the man she was marrying was familiar enough with what was there and liked it fine.” A devious grin curved her mouth when her sister shifted uncomfortably. “I think we all know how that came about.”

“She also said it would get in the way of swinging her sword,” Sansa shot back, “and we all know how good she is at that too.”

“I also think your mother would understand if I fed both of you to my cousin’s dragon if you do not stop bickering about what goes on in my bedchamber,” Brienne snapped at them. She might be sworn to them, and their mother before them, but she did still have limits to her patience. The fitting alone was enough to test it without their bickering.

“I don’t think Drogon would like them,” Daenerys said, “Northerners are so prickly. They might get stuck in his teeth.” She smiled as she poured herself a goblet of wine.

Sansa bristled where she sat and turned her attention back to the correspondence that was spread out on the table in front of her. She had taken to bringing it with her, as she did not stop being the Lady of Winterfell just because she was in the south. “Perhaps he would choke on us then,” she replied coolly.

“Perhaps.” Daenerys shrugged. “I would not risk him to find out. I believe we were discussing our Warden of the West and his ability to irritate anyone within hearing range, however.”

“You should learn how to use a sword,” Arya told her, “he stops talking when you leave bruises on him.” Her grey eyes glittered happily. “Every time Lord Selwyn looks at him he shuts right up. Is he still limping?”

The low sound that rumbled in Brienne’s throat was more growl than groan. “They are both stupid. I shouldn’t speak to either of them again.” Jaime had returned from sparring with her father that first day with bruises and a few scrapes that he had brushed off as nothing. The second time they had sparred he had come back to her with a limp. Had it not been for the other men teasing him about it,
she wondered how long it would have been before either he or her father told her they were taking up training swords against one another. Now it had become a regular occurrence, and despite telling Jaime that he could, he would not fight back against her father at full strength because it was her father, even after having seen her do so. It was idiotic!

Sansa snorted. “They are men,” she said without looking up, “it matters not to them that you can defend your own honor, they will fight about it because they think they have something to prove. They could have settled this before we even arrived, but if you did not see their effort, how could you be impressed?”

“Impressed?” Her lip curled. “I should knock their heads together and be done with it and them.” She huffed. It was frustrating. She was caught between them and there was nothing that she could do about it. One was her father and the other was… well, it was Jaime. He would allow himself to be beaten and bruised to prove himself worthy, and her father would never acknowledge that she was no longer his little girl. Even though she had already knocked him into the dirt a time or two herself. Brienne shook her head. “Jaime likes the sound of his own voice too much,” she told the Queen, “be impassive. He will not stop talking, but he won’t try so hard to provoke you.”

“Silence makes him uncomfortable,” Arya said. “He thinks about mistakes and losses, or hears the echoes of failures.” She shrugged when they looked at her. “He isn’t so hard to read. Most people aren’t once you find their weaknesses. When you weren’t here there was nothing to shut him up, so I let him tell me stories about the battles against my brother, Robb, or the times he spent as a squire to Ser Barristan, or when he was knighted by Ser Arthur, and what it was like in the Kingsguard before everything went to shit. If he was talking about something I wanted to hear about then I wasn’t tempted to slit his throat,” she said plainly. “I thought it might hurt your feelings if I killed him before you could throttle him yourself,” she told Brienne.

“You like him.” Sansa was staring at her sister, more astonished than she could put words to. “You actually like him. After everything he did, killing Jory Cassel and injuring father, fighting our brother and fucking his sister, you actually don’t mind him at all.” She stopped writing and put down her quill. “I do not believe this.”

“I do not.” Arya glared at her. “I don’t have to like someone to let them live. I just tolerate his continued ability to draw breath into his lungs, there’s nothing wrong with that.” She lifted her chin in a show of defiance. “I like Brienne well enough, and she more than likes him, that’s all it is.”

“No.” Sansa leaned back in her chair. “He’s like one of the knights in the stories that you and Bran used to love, but he’s as weird and twisted as you are, and that’s what makes you like him.”

Arya’s nose wrinkled. “Don’t be a twat. He’s a Lannister. There’s nothing to like about them.” Her head inclined. “Or are you changing your mind about that now that Ser Daven and Ser Addam have decided to compete for your attentions?”

Sansa rolled her eyes as she turned back to her letters. “They can compete all they like, it does not mean they are going to win anything. I am not interested in the attentions of men anymore, especially old men.” She glanced sideways at her sister. “And I do not like how much time you spend with Sandor. You’re picking up some of his poorer habits.”

“Because he doesn’t speak pretty to spare your feelings?” Arya shrugged. “He never did. That’s not his way. It’s not mine either. I told you, I don’t lie. You’re acting like a highborn ass. It would do you good to have a few men, old or not, giving you some attention. Brienne is fucking Jaime, the Queen is fucking Jon, I’m fucking Gendry, and if you ask me, you need to be fucked more than the rest of us.” She needed to know it wasn’t always horrible, that men were shits, but some of them could be good and kind, and gentle. Arya knew that she and Brienne weren’t going to be there to
protect Sansa when she went north again. She would have Podrick, and Arya trusted him well enough, as well as she trusted anyone who wasn’t family, but he wouldn’t be able to protect Sansa from her past.

“I am not, though,” the queen interrupted the staring contest that had erupted between the sisters. “That hasn’t happened since we learned we’re related. It bothered him, I think, and now it doesn’t.” She sighed as she took a seat, folding herself comfortably into a cushioned chair. “He’s… courting me, I believe.” Daenerys frowned. She wasn’t entirely certain that’s what he was doing, but he was being kind and attentive, and he wasn’t running from her anymore.

“You think?” Arya blinked at her. “How can you not know? Aren’t men usually pretty obvious about that?”

“I don’t know,” Daenerys admitted with a shrug, “I have never been courted before. I was given to Drogo, and then he died.” There had been another lover, of course, but Daario hadn’t exactly courted her either. He was obvious with his intentions and she indulged her own desires. With Jon it had been all passion and yearning and need almost from the start. She wasn’t sure what they were now, only that she felt he was being more careful as he tried to balance how they both felt with what duty required of them.

“Well I’m not the one to ask,” Arya said, “I told Gendry to take off his pants and he did.” She craned her head around and looked at Brienne. “Well?”

She blinked as she realized she was now the subject of all eyes in the room, save those working to fit her for the wedding and Lady Sansa, who had not looked up from her correspondence again. “What could possibly make you think I would know the courtship rituals of a northern lord?”

“Any lord, actually,” Arya shrugged. “You are both highborn and older than us, and you’ve been betrothed before.”

“Oh, I see.” Brienne rolled her eyes, even as she heard Sansa snicker. “Thank you, Lady Arya, for reminding me that I am both a failure at marriage and a very old lady, I had forgotten those minor peculiarities of mine,” she drawled sarcastically. “I hate to disappoint you, but my first betrothal occurred when I was but a child, and he died before I ever met him. The second was the unfortunate jackass from Griffin’s Roost that you have already met, and the third was a poor choice that my father made out of desperation. I sent him away with broken bones.” She shrugged, and then regretted it when a pin poked into her side. “The most recent… is an idiot, but I decided to keep him anyway. I wouldn’t call any of our history a courtship. You would do better to ask your sister, who is also older than you,” she added, in retribution to her Lady’s amusement.

“But he gave you a sword,” Jory pointed out. They had discussed her attitude at length, and she was attempting to curb it, although she continued to dislike the man. He was rude and arrogant and it was very annoying, but she hid her disdain and went about her duties as she was bid. “I was betrothed very young too, but my intended did give me gifts when it was appropriate to do so. I suspect that was his mother’s doing, however. Still, a sword is better than flowers.”

“I won’t disagree,” Arya chirped. “Sansa?”

She sighed when she lifted her head. “The closest I ever got was Loras Tyrell and Petyr Baelish. Ramsay wasn’t the courting type, and I was a child when I was married to Tyrion. Loras was more interested in hiding his affair with Renly Baratheon than what was underneath my skirts, and Petyr…” Her jaw clenched for a moment before she forced herself to relax. “Well, his idea of courtship was comparing me to our mother and telling me his plans for sitting the Iron Throne with me at his side, when he wasn’t trading me to Ramsay Bolton, of course. None of which much
endeared him to me, obviously."

“Basically,” Daenerys said, “you are telling me that not a one of you knows anything of courting, and Jon has probably never courted a woman in his life.” She took their silence as agreement. “Well I feel so much better, thank you for this enlightening discussion.”

“I think the most enlightening thing to come out of this discussion is the fact that you should just tell him to take off his pants, and hope he gives you a sword.” Arya tilted her head and smirked.

There was silence in the room. They might have heard a pin drop, literally, as even the seamstresses and maids had stopped moving. Brienne was staring, wide-eyed, at Arya, while even the Queen’s lips had parted in surprise. Sansa sat straight-backed in her chair and gaped at her sister. She did not normally blush, but a red hue was spreading across her cheeks. Her mouth opened, but there was no sound to be made.

The queen pressed her lips together and inclined her head in thought. “I should… take that under advisement,” she said, if a bit haltingly. She could not decide if she was amused or offended, or some odd mix of both. People did not usually speak or act this way in her presence. It was an interesting turn of events.

When her sister snickered, Sansa jolted. “Arya!” She could only imagine the very mortification that their mother would have felt upon witnessing such a moment. It might have put her in her grave, were she not already dead.

Her brows lifted and she returned her sister’s gaze calmly. “Do you have any better suggestions? I was only trying to be helpful; Jon gets stupid when he’s being especially brooding. I could ask Brienne, but she isn’t going to tell us, we already know that. I’m also pretty sure the limit of her experience on that subject is it’s bloody hot in here,” Arya pitched her voice low in a very poor imitation of a lion they all knew.

Her wide eyes, shining brightly with embarrassment and looking impossibly blue in the afternoon sunlight that filled the chamber, blinked slowly. “How can you possibly know about that?”

Arya stood up and walked to the table to pour herself some wine. “He talks a lot.”

“I am going to kill him,” Brienne decided with a groan. “I think I might cut his other hand off first, and then I think I might just beat him to death. Do I want to know why you were talking to Jaime about… that?”

“I think it was Tyrion’s fault, actually.” Arya sat down again and sipped her wine with slight shrug. “There was a lot of drinking, and he was very maudlin, and then the imp decided to make fun of him, but that only made him more maudlin.”

“Don’t call him that,” Sansa told her. “Use his name or don’t speak of him at all.” She turned in her chair to gaze at the other women. “You picked a really poor time to decide you want to send him to the Stranger,” she teased her knight, “we could have had it done at Winterfell and no one would have blamed us, but you insisted on saving him.”

“A lapse in judgment, obviously.” Brienne huffed a sigh. “He is such an idiot. Half the time I don’t know why I even like him, much less love him. He’s a fool, and when he opens his mouth, he is an even bigger fool.”

“If we could choose who we love, I think all of us might have very different lives now.” Daenerys looked around the room. Her eyes crinkled and she smiled brightly at them. “I would still be Queen,
“Not if Sansa was already Queen,” Arya tossed back with a grin. “If she had chosen better than that cunt, Joffrey.”

“We would all of us be better off if I had never fancied myself in love with Joffrey,” Sansa rolled her eyes toward the heavens. “I would love nothing more than to be able to take that back.”

Daenerys shook her head as she stood. “I almost hate that I am about to say this, but I think we must thank Lord Tyrion for pushing us to these meetings. Men have surrounded me almost my entire life; the women that were with me were my servants, and I was fond of them, but they would not speak to me this plainly. I was Khaleesi, and then Mother of Dragons, Breaker of Chains and the Unburnt. I have been a conqueror or the hated foreign invader, and now I am Queen.” She wandered around the room and lifted a bit of thick blue linen that was being fashioned for her cousin’s sleeves. While she studied it, she wondered why she chose to reveal more of herself. Perhaps it was that she was tired of being alone, or that when she was with them she felt the absence of Missandei more keenly than ever. She missed having a friend, and while she did not think these women could fill that gap, the longing in her for something more than emptiness tempted her to reach across the chasm between them. “I didn’t have a septa or ladies’ maids, and it is not only you, cousin, who cannot sew,” she said with a smile. “I appreciate the honesty, even if it is a bit crude,” she looked pointedly at Arya. The younger woman returned her gaze. She thought for a moment about all that she had learned, all that she had done, and the places she had been. Arya thought back to the lessons with Septa Mordane, and how she had always been told to act like a lady. To sit with her back straight and her knees together. She thought of the long hours of sewing lessons, etiquette lessons, dancing, and all the things she had hated as a girl. “I could be more proper,” she said finally, “if I wanted to be. I know how. I don’t speak like this in front of Lord Selwyn, mainly because I know that it would embarrass Brienne, but he has been kind, and honest, and I do respect him. I don’t speak like this in front of Ser Davos either, or I try not to, for some of the same reasons.” All of her deference was not because they were older, but she did try, just as she would have done in front of her father or Uncle Benjen, had they lived. “It isn’t only Sandor’s influence,” she said, and looked in her sister’s direction. “I learned a lot of it from him, that’s true. One of the things he taught me is that people will say a lot of pretty words to distract you from the truth, but better an ugly truth than a pretty lie. I used to hate him. I wanted to kill him. I think a part of me even wanted Brienne to kill him when they fought.” She glanced at the tall knight, “and maybe I shouldn’t have run off, and I probably shouldn’t have provoked that fight. You were just trying to help me, I know that now, but I didn’t know it then.”

Brienne frowned. She shifted, when the seamstress asked her to, and was glad that they seemed to be almost finished with her for the day. The alterations had been marked and now they were finally removing the fabric and corset. It was hard to fathom why women would ever choose to wear such things. Her focus remained on Arya, though, and she shook her head at the girl. “I never blamed you for that. Much of it was my own fault. It never occurred to me what either of you might think when you saw the sword. You had every reason not to trust the Lannisters, and I should have considered that you wouldn’t take my word for it. I was just as bad,” she admitted, “when I challenged The Hound. I only saw his reputation; I didn’t stop to listen to his words. It was an unfortunate moment that I would take back if I could.” She had always blamed her own stupidity for the fact that Arya had been lost for so long.

“I had my part to play,” Arya told her. “I had to leave, I needed to go to Braavos. If I hadn’t become the fighter I am, I don’t think I could have stopped the Night King, and we’d have lost Bran. We’d have lost all of us.” She hoped Jon might have gotten there in time, or even Brienne, Sandor perhaps, even Jaime could have tried to save him, but Arya didn’t know how that might have ended. She
believed in Jon and Brienne, but there was also the Red Witch’s prophecy. “Melisandre told me, years ago, that there was darkness in me,” she told them. “She said I would shut many eyes forever. Brown eyes, blue eyes, and green eyes.” Arya met Brienne’s gaze and saw the worry there. “He isn’t on my list, he never was, but Cersei is. I haven’t killed her, but I wonder if I’m still supposed to.”

“Prophecies are dangerous,” Daenerys said quietly. “Melisandre said that, too. She told me at Dragonstone, when she came to tell me of the King in the North whom she believed to be the Prince that was Promised. I think we can all agree that Jon is wonderful, but I do not think we can put much meaning to the Red Witch’s belief in the things she thought she saw in the flames.” She put the fabric down and lifted a length of leather. She laid it against the blue and frowned as she studied it. “Cersei Lannister will die for her crimes, that is assured. I will not ask you to be her executioner. Jon has offered to swing the sword when the time comes.”

“Jon?” Sansa sat straighter in her chair. “Why Jon?” Her eyes narrowed. “Would you not just use your dragon as you have in the past? You burned the Tarlys, and Varys, and there are rumors of how you dealt with the slavers in Meereen. Jon is not an executioner.”

“No, he is not.” Daenerys almost smiled at the bitterness in the other woman’s voice. “Jon believes that he who passes the sentence must carry out the punishment. I agree with him. Normally, I would use Drogon. But he is the only child I have left. It puts him in danger if others fear him, and I will not have Drogon hurt or lost because of my need for justice. He sleeps in the dragonpit, well guarded, because I am afraid to send him back to Dragonstone while Cersei is there. I know that she’s locked away, but I cannot risk Drogon. I will not. My foolish ignorance cost me Viserion and Rhaegal. Drogon has always protected me. He has always come to me when I need him most. It is my turn to protect him.” Her eyes burned, they were bright amethyst with love and determination. She felt the ache of fear and the bitter emptiness of loss where her love for her other two children had once filled her heart. Her need for justice could not eclipse that; she would not allow it to. “Jon knows what my children mean to me. He has offered to be the one, and as Lord Protector of the Seven Kingdoms, he will see Cersei’s sentence carried out.” Her face softened and she smiled sadly at Sansa. “I think he wants to do it for you, too. For all of his siblings, really, for what you had to suffer because of her.”

Sansa deflated somewhat. She exhaled a small breath and nodded. “My apologies. I suppose I just worry about him. There are still people out there who are loyal to Cersei. I can’t imagine who that might be, but there must be for her to have kept her throne so long, even after her brother left her side. I think a part of me is going to continue to worry until she is dead and long buried in a crypt somewhere. She always managed to win, somehow, always. There was always another plan, another way out, it didn’t matter how dire the situation seemed, Cersei always, always won. Everyone who has underestimated her has lost, even her own brothers.” Sansa looked away from them. She shifted, uncomfortable with how much she had revealed. “I know it’s hard for Tyrion. As much as she hates him, she is still his sister, and there is a part of him that still wants her to accept him. That is never going to happen, and he knows that, better than any of us, probably, but she is still a weakness for him. He still underestimates her. And Jaime…” She looked up and her eyes found Brienne. Sansa felt badly for what she was about to say, but it needed to be said. When her brave knight nodded, a sad smile touched her lips. “He will always love her. He will always want to protect her. I believe he loves you, I do, I have seen how he looks at you, but she is still his sister. She is still his twin, the mother of his children, and she carries his child now. I believe him when he says that he thinks she is lost, but there is a part of him that will always be blind to how terrible she truly is.”

“She will not leave Dragonstone alive.” Daenerys walked to where the other woman sat and stood before her, the bundle of bleached leather still clutched tightly in one hand. She reached out with her other, hesitated for a moment and almost drew her hand back before she drew a breath and carried on with her intent. She laid her hand against Sansa’s shoulder, lightly, tentatively at first, but when she
felt the tremor beneath her fingers, she curled her hand slightly to grip her more securely. “I will not allow her to leave Dragonstone alive,” she said. “When her time comes, we will go to her there. I will not risk her escape. We will bring who we must, and she will be tried, and then she will die. Until that day she is well guarded by my Unsullied and my Dothraki. She will never hurt anyone again. You have my word.” Her words were hard, and determined, but her eyes were gentle when she met the clear blue gaze of the woman that had been her rival. “We are not friends,” she said more softly, “but please believe me when I say that I would have you be safe, Lady Stark.”

She nodded before she looked away, swallowing hard. Her fear and her hatred for Cersei were so much a part of her, Sansa did not know if she would ever be free of them. She wondered how long the woman who had so abused and terrorized her would need to be in her grave before she would truly feel safe from her. Not even the scars that Ramsay Bolton had left on her body could compare to the marks that Cersei Lannister had left on her soul. He had been a monster, but Cersei was a demon. Sansa’s jaw clenched. She breathed deeply and pressed her eyes tightly closed. When she looked up again, the Queen was still standing before her, hand on her shoulder. Sansa reached up and laid her fingers, cold and unsure as they were, atop the other woman’s small hand. “I believe you,” she said softly.

Daenerys nodded. It was the first time that Sansa had ever chosen to trust her. She was surprised that so small a victory could feel so rewarding. The Queen held on to that feeling, even as she cleared her throat and turned away. The others were watching them with concern. She pulled away from Sansa and held up the leather in her other hand. “Would this not look better if it were black? I understand the grey, she is the future Evenstar, but the steel of her armor will be silver, so would it not look more appealing if her leather and trousers were black?” She had been giving Sansa time to compose herself, but turned back, brows rising in askance. “Black is a Lannister, Targaryen, and Stark color, is it not?”

“It is.” Sansa stood and smoothed her hands down her skirts before she walked across the room. She stopped to pick up a bolt of black fabric and carried it with her to where Brienne stood, watching her with concern. Without meeting her eyes, she held the black fabric in front of the other woman and tilted her head in consideration. “Yes, I think you are right. The black would look better. It is red and gold for House Lannister, but they have accented it with black in the past, so this will work well, I think.”

“Jaime’s armor is mostly black now,” Arya said, trying to be helpful, though she understood nothing of fashion and did not wish to. She shrugged where she sat, and pushed away thoughts of sneaking into Dragonstone and ending the former Queen before she could become a problem for anyone, if for no other reason than to make her sister feel safe again. “When I saw him in the Red Keep, after the battle, I almost didn’t recognize him. Lord Tywin’s armor was mostly gold and black too, but it was fancier, and there were lions all over it.”

“Yes, I have seen it,” Brienne replied. It was on a stand in his rooms, though he usually stayed in hers. While the others were distracted, talking about armor and leather, and how she might better be adorned, she let her hand sweep forward until her fingers brushed lightly against her Lady’s hand. When Sansa finally looked up, Brienne dipped her head slightly to meet her gaze. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she read the worry, the discomfort, and even the embarrassment in the younger woman’s eyes. “Until my last breath,” she whispered softly, but her lips were pressed thin with determination, and her eyes were alight with it.

“I know.” Sansa gripped her hand, for just a moment, before she let go to circle the other woman. She made a show of inspecting the work that was being done on the garment that would serve as outfit for the wedding and tourney, the opening fight at least. It was only the two of them in that corner, while the maids and seamstress looked for the right shade of leather to replace the bleached
material they planned to use before. “You cannot fight this battle for me,” she whispered fervently, “she has reason to hate you more than anyone now.”

“You know if it came to a choice I would choose you over him,” Brienne hissed. “He knows that too. He understands what this oath means to me. I will not have you worried so.”

“I trust no one more than you,” Sansa assured her, “but even you cannot protect me from my memories.” She laid her hand against the taller woman’s arm, felt the strength of it beneath her palm. Sansa leaned closer to her back, while her eyes studied the seams that pulled the blue fabric together against her sides. The armored pieces that Gendry was making would cover the seams, but still she inspected the stitching. ‘I would not let you choose, anyway,” Sansa told her. “I would not dishonor you by asking you to turn your back on your duty to your family and your House, and besides, one of us should be happy.”

“My Lady--”

“Enough,” Sansa told her. “I have said all I will. You bedded him, and now you will wed him, that is the end of it.”

Brienne huffed with exasperation and cast a look over her shoulder. Her brows were drawn together in a deep scowl. It was only the faintest hint of amusement in her lady’s eyes that kept her lip from curling and had her swallowing the curse on her tongue. “Say the word and I will take you back to Winterfell, the Seven take the others,” she said instead.

“So your poor, lonely lion can follow us and spend all his time sulking around Winterfell while he complains about how much he hates the North?” Sansa clucked her tongue and moved in front of her again. “I don’t think so.” Her brows drew together while she studied the lines of the bodice and the way it flowed downward, framing the other woman’s torso. “Is this too uncomfortable for you?” Her fingers skirted her sides, where the corset pinched inward, putting more definition to a waist that was mostly straight, but lean and muscled.

“No more than my armor,” Brienne watched her lips purse in concentration, and finally dissatisfaction. “Truly, it isn’t that bad, and it is only for a day.”

“Perhaps.” Sansa shook her head. “No. This won’t do.” She turned and waved the seamstress to them. “It should pinch less here, and I want it to frame her. Stop trying to make her look like me. We want it to be feminine, because it is a wedding, but shape it to work with her, not to make her work with it. If you cannot accomplish that, I will find someone who can.” Sansa pulled away in swirl of skirts and auburn hair. “And remember, she has to fight in it. If he wins there will be none of us that ever hear the end of it. I will be most displeased if that happens and shoddy sewing is the cause for it.”

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“Enough for today.” Brienne was finished with being poked and prodded, tugged and stretched. She thought, or rather she had hoped, she left all that behind when she left her home and her terrible Septa. “Get this off of me. You can make the modifications you need to without me having to wear the bloody thing.”

The moment she started pulling at it, there was a maid at her side to help her remove it. When it was finally away from her, with all of the blue fabric and constricting whalebone, Brienne took a deep breath. One day, for one day she could make that work, and it helped that there would be armored plates and breeches to go with it. She rolled her shoulders and stretched her arms over her head as she walked away from the corner where she had been standing for so long. After she was once again dressed more like herself, and she had a goblet of wine in hand, she sat on one of the thick, cushioned couches to rest her back. “Tell me we don’t actually have to thank Tyrion for this idea.
Have you ever heard a Lannister brag? It’s damned annoying.”

“Never to his face,” Daenerys decided. “He’s horrible when he knows that he is right.” She reclaimed her previous seat and lifted her goblet once more. “So what is next on our agenda?”

Sansa returned to her table and shuffled through her parchments. “Ser Bronn of the Blackwater,” she stated. “He was promised a castle and he isn’t going to stop pestering everyone until he has it. I propose we give him the Dreadfort.”

“A northern castle?” Surprise filled Arya’s face. “He’s an up-jumped souther knight, why would you give him a northern holdfast?”

A small smile curved Sansa’s lips. “Because he is annoying. Also because I was Lady Bolton and it is now mine. I don’t want it. I want nothing at all to do with anything the Bolton’s had. We emptied their coffers and stores, and most of the smallfolk came to Winterfell before the great battle. What guards and men-at-arms were left have scattered or were killed in the Battle of the Bastards. Let Ser Bronn spend a season with the Northmen, let him deal with a Northern winter and trying to satisfy his northern people. Let him answer to the Lady of Wintefell who is also Wardeness of the North. Then I think, if he survives, he will be less like to complain of castles he has not yet been granted.”

“If that is what you choose to do,” Daenerys nodded, “then I agree. I like the idea. I know from my own experiences in the North,” she smiled, “that the people there are not very welcoming to outsiders. I think they may be less so to a knight with a history of working for the Lannisters. I will have Tyrion draw up the paperwork for you, and you may present it to him at Court as Wardeness of the North. It will have both our seals upon it.” It would be a Northern decree, approved of by the Crown.

“We won’t be able to send ravens north of the Twins soon,” Sansa told her. “Bran says even he won’t be able to ensure they make it farther than the Neck. It will be too cold for them to travel. We are going to need to begin dispatching riders to Moat Cailin with messages for the North, and to the Bloody Gate with news for the Eryie.”

“Thank your brother for his assistance,” Daenerys told her. “I agree; we should keep the ravens for shorter travels here, in the Crownlands and wherever else it is safe to send them. Your Northmen are more accustomed to the cold, do you have any riders you would trust to act as dispatches?”

“I do,” Sansa nodded. “I think I would like to appoint several. It is several weeks’ travel to Moat Cailin, longer with the winter snows. Then it will take a while to get news to and from Winterfell. I would like to send word to Maester Wolkan to begin sending reports to Moat Cailin once a week. We will send our riders North at regular intervals to pick up those reports and travel back with them to the Crossroads. From there, another rider will bring the packages to King’s Landing. We should do the same with the Eyrie.”

“A sound idea,” the Queen agreed. “Let’s put that in place. I think you and Jon would be the best to implement it. If we had a Grand Maester we could rely upon his advice, but the Citadel has been slow to send us one. I cannot blame them, given what happened with the previous assignments, but we are still negotiating. It will be a long, arduous ride north, work with Sam to make sure these men are properly compensated.” Lord Tarly had reluctantly agreed to take up his place as Master of Coin and head of his House. He still would not look her in the eyes, but Daenerys did not blame him for that. “What else?”

“I don’t like the Commander of the Gold Cloaks,” Arya told her. “He seems shifty to me. He joined us when the fighting started, but I think he only did it to save his own skin. Usually I can respect that, but the manses on the east side of the city have better patrols than Flea Bottom or the areas that were...
hardest hit with the fighting near the center of the city. It probably doesn’t hurt that the people living in those manses can afford to bribe him.”

Daenerys scowled. “I will speak to Lord Tyrion about the matter this evening. He had some success organizing the City Watch when he was acting Hand to Joffrey. I will instruct him to begin making changes immediately.”

“Ser Lyle Crakehall’s youngest brother arrived in the city a few days ago,” Brienne told her. “I have met with the man and find him to be much like his brother. His reputation, too, is quite good. He fought in the war of the Five Kings to help defend the Westerlands from the invading Northmen, but he has spent much of his time since back at Crakehall as part of the garrison that was left to defend his home. I think he would be a good fit for your Queensguard, and as he is the youngest son, there is no concern that we are creating conflict by taking an heir.”

“As my father did when he took Lord Jaime into his service,” Daenerys nodded. “I would like to avoid that if we can. What of the young knight from Harvest Hall? Were you able to gain an audience with him as well?”

“I did.” That had been a bit of a trial, but when he had realized that it was the daughter of the Evenstar that was asking for the audience, the young knight had immediately agreed. The meeting itself was a bit strained. Brienne remembered him from Renly’s camp. “Lewstan Selmy is not as young and brash as I remember him to be, and some of his arrogance has been tempered with age. My thoughts on the matter are a little biased, but he is a proud Stormlander and he would serve well, I think. He is also a second son of a second son, so he does not stand to inherit much, if at all. His prospects for marriage are low, despite his name, due to his place in his House’s line of succession.”

“I would like an audience with both men,” Daenerys decided. “I know I am probably being sentimental because Ser Barristan was his cousin, but I will meet with him and decide. I trust your judgment, and I will not make the offer if he is as disagreeable of character as you think, but I would speak with him.” She considered the contents of her wine goblet while she thought through her other choices. “I like the idea of having a member of my Queensguard from each of the kingdoms, but I think I would like to keep Jhaggo and Kaharo as members of my guard too. They will not wear the armor or the white cloaks, but they will represent my Khalisar, who joined me on my journey here.”

“Why not do both,” Sansa suggested. “Have the traditional seven knights of your Queensguard, one from each of the seven kingdoms, and keep your blood riders at your side too. You have already made changes, and other sovereigns have had personal guards outside the Kingsguard. There is no reason that you cannot do so.”

It took only a moment for Daenerys to think about it and agree. She nodded, wondering if perhaps she had only needed someone else to voice what she wanted to do. “Then I shall. We have representatives from the Stormlands and the Westerlands to consider, and I assume you found a backup in case I did not like Ser Selmy?”

“I did,” Brienne stated. “Ser Alyn Mertyns of Mistwood. He is the unmarried third son of Lady Mary Mertyns, who is Lady of Mistwood. He has a good reputation, and I found him to be affable when we were part of Renly’s host. He is good with a sword, and was one of the top ten in the melee I won before joining Renly’s Rainbow guard.”

“Then I shall meet with him as well,” Daenerys told her. “Make a list of the others you know, either by reputation or experience. I would like audiences with all of them. I will have Jon and Grey Worm join me for those meetings.”
“Matthor would be a good choice for you as well,” Sansa told her, “though I would hate to part with him. He would be a good representative of the North. He is brave and a good fighter, and Northmen are loyal.” When they were not betraying her brother Robb, a voice in the back of her mind whispered, but Sansa thought they had rooted out most of those individuals and dealt with them.

“Is he the tall man,” the Queen asked, “with the very dark hair who is part of your household guard?”

“That is Loren,” Sansa told her. “Matthor is the shorter one, with the curly brown hair. He isn’t a knight, and I know that traditionally the guard have all been knights, but he would be true to his vows. He isn’t the heir to any great Houses, so there would be no conflict.”

“I do not care if my Queensguard are knights or not,” Daenerys admitted. “I think there are some that might argue the fact, due to the tradition. I can think of one that sits my Council who might just have an opinion on it.”

“The Hound isn’t a knight,” Arya reminded them. “He was one of Joffrey’s Kingsguard. So there’s already another tradition.”

“Then we will consider the matter settled,” the Queen decided. “Lady Sansa, could you tell me more of what you know of Willas Tyrell. We believe that he will reach the city soon, and I would like to be prepared…”

She turned in her chair and clasped her hands in her lap. There was not much that she could tell, but Sansa began to repeat what she had learned from Queen Margaery and Lady Olenna, as well as the other stories she knew about House Tyrell.

It was in that manner that they continued their afternoon, filling the remainder of their meeting with discussions of items that were of importance to all of them, and decisions that Daenerys would take to her Council during its next meeting.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

Again, my apologies for the delay. I’ve written through CH 33 - but work is killing me. No time to edit. Thank you all so much!
“You are making a mistake. You are allowing Cersei Lannister to linger. She will not sit idle in her cell at Dragonstone.”

Bran Stark was seated in the Queen’s solar. He watched the looks that were exchanged between her and Jon Snow, Jon Stark now. He watched them impassively while they considered his words.

The Queen folded her hands in her lap. “You have been here for some days, why do you wait to bring this to my attention now?”

“I was watching,” Bran stated, as though that were obvious. “She has been betrayed by family and bannermen. She will repay that betrayal.”

Jon frowned as he shifted in his seat. They had a city that was beginning to fill with nobles as the Great Houses responded to notices that had been sent with requests for fealty. There was a wedding, too, that was only days away. There was a tourney and a coronation to get through, and months until they would be free to see Cersei’s sentence carried out. “Bran, what have you seen?”

“Those who were once loyal to Cersei are no longer, but I still see possibility. There is something stirring outside these walls, but I cannot see it clearly.” Bran had to know where to look. “I cannot see the future. I can only see possibilities created by the actions of now. What I see is a haze, though many are assured of their decisions. I think the threat will come from the lioness. A wounded and cornered animal is the most dangerous.”

Daenerys allowed her gaze to slide to Jon beside her. “We have promised Lord Lannister that we would delay the execution until the child is born.”

“The child is not his.” Bran stated plainly. “He believes it to be, but he has been deceived.”

The Queen immediately straightened at that news. It changed things, considerably. “Tell me,” her voice dipped imperiously.

“Those who were once loyal to Cersei are no longer, but I still see possibility. There is something stirring outside these walls, but I cannot see it clearly.” Bran had to know where to look. “I cannot see the future. I can only see possibilities created by the actions of now. What I see is a haze, though many are assured of their decisions. I think the threat will come from the lioness. A wounded and cornered animal is the most dangerous.”

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His head tilted. “When the Sept of Baelor was destroyed he contemplated leaving his Queen’s side. When it was suggested that he lead an army to Highgarden to seize the castle, lands, and gold of House Tyrell, Cersei sensed that he was hesitant. He was reluctant to move against Lady Olenna, particularly after her family was destroyed in the Sept. The Queen was aware that she would need to secure his loyalty. Their children were dead; there was nothing left to bind him to her. The Queen heard whispers that Jaime Lannister was more concerned with the happenings in the North than those here, in King’s Landing.” His gaze moved from the Queen to his half-brother. “Riders were sent north to assess the victory of the Battle of the Bastards. Lord Lannister had heard only whispers of the outcome, and that most of those who had fought had died. He had… concerns,” Bran stated without inflection, “that Ser Brienne might be among those who had fallen.”

“So she lied about having his child,” Jon stated, feeling disgusted on the other man’s behalf, “to keep him at her side. When he did leave her side, the only mercy he asked was on the child’s behalf.”

“Which has now given her the time she needs to plot her revenge and possible escape,” Daenerys sneered. She did not think it possible that Cersei Lannister would escape her hold, but she did not
appreciate being played the fool. “She would have known that he would ask, but whether or not I would be willing to grant that mercy was another matter.” She would not regret that mercy. “Nothing has truly changed. I will not punish a child for the mistakes of its mother, but it does put us in another position with our Warden of the West. Will he believe you?”

“He will.” Bran told her. He would not reveal how he knew that to be true. Bran still did not believe that punishing the older man for what had ultimately given them the means of victory over the Night King would have any positive impact on their present or future. He had learned as the Three-Eyed Raven that there were some moments in time, some events of the past that belonged in the dark. The part of him that was still Brandon Stark, however, hated the other man for what he had done. The Raven knew that the past could not be changed, some misdeeds could not be undone, and service would have to suffice in place of forgiveness. “Ser Jaime, now Lord of House Lannister swore his sword to Jon Stark. Though he often thinks it foolishly blind, he trusts the unyielding honor of House Stark.”

Jon heaved a sigh and shifted in his chair again. He looked at Daenerys beside him, brow knitted together. “I will tell him,” he decided. “It should come from me. I do not like the idea of pushing up the trial and sentence, but perhaps we should move her to the dungeons underneath the castle? She has enjoyed accommodation befitting her station thus far, but she is not owed that.”

“No she is not.” The Queen considered for a moment before she nodded. “See it done. I want the guard at Dragonstone doubled. We will speak to Ser Davos. I would have more ships moved into position around the island. We will be ready for any attempts at rescue that may come.” Her brow arched as she looked at the young man in front of them again. “Would that suffice in halting any further betrayals from Lady Baratheon?”

“From the Lady yes,” Bran agreed, “but I suspect there are already plans in play outside of Dragonstone. Qyburn, who was serving as both Hand and Maester was clever, but of questionable character; Ser Gregor Clegane was not his only experiment. Cersei knew that it would take a child to bind Ser Jaime to her, and so she asked her most trusted servant and advisor to make certain that it happened. I would not like to look too deeply to know how that is so.” Even the Raven was disgusted by the lengths the disgraced Maester would go to for the sake of science and knowledge, and to use both in service of his Queen. There were some things, too, that he just did not want to know, that was the part of him that was still Brandon Stark.

Jon and Daenerys exchanged horrified looks. Bran had not hesitated before to look where he needed to for information and truth. That he would not do so now told them how dark the deeds in the Red Keep had been before they had taken it. “Perhaps we should not tell him that,” Jon suggested.

“I agree,” Daenerys fought the urge to shudder. She did not like the man, but saw no need in causing more pain than necessary. It would be difficult enough to hear that his former lover had lied to him. “I was pleased that you chose to accompany Lady Stark south,” She said, changing the subject and hoping to regain some warmth and lightness in the day. “Your counsel was very helpful, and I believe it has been so again. What are your plans now? You indicated there are more wars to come?” Had they not fought enough?

“There will always be wars where there is strife and displeasure,” Bran explained, his manner as stoic as ever. “Your rule is almost assured now that you have made strides to strengthen it. Others would disagree. I do not believe they will be successful, but as I have stated, I—”

“Cannot see the future,” Daenerys finished for him. “That is disheartening, but I will choose to believe that we will continue to be victorious. Can you tell me where these wars will come from? Who among us would betray their Queen?”
“Not among us.” Bran blinked once. “You will yet win the loyalty of those who surround you now. Others would not betray their oaths. While you may not be beloved of all, for some it will be a matter of honor to remain true to their Queen. I can only advise that you not ignore far reaching dangers for the sake of those that you may suspect within easy reach.”

The Queen glanced at Jon before she leaned forward slightly in her seat. “Would you be willing to join my Council? We have done away with the position of Master of Whispers, but I think we could yet have use for your unique abilities.”

“The Three-Eyed Raven does not serve the Iron Throne,” he explained. “It is the realms of men, all men that are served by the Raven. I will stay in King’s Landing until my presence is no longer needed, and then I will travel to Old Town, I believe. There are those in the Citadel who have lingered too long. The knowledge of man that would save the realms has been lost or hidden. There is much there to be revealed and uncovered.” There were truths and histories he could impart upon the Maesters, changes that he could help procure for the sake of the future. Eventually he would find his way north again, but Bran could not predict when that might be.

Jon had expected that, somehow. It seemed like something his brother would do, or whatever this creature was that had once been his brother. Jon still could not fully wrap his head around the changes in Bran. There were moments when he seemed like himself and others, like now, when he could not be more different than the boy he had once known. “Have you told Sansa?”

Bran tilted his head at the slight smile that was cast his direction. “Not as yet, but I will soon. She will not like my decision, but it is mine to make. It will be better for her, I think, to make her place in the North without my presence at Winterfell. The Northern lords prefer her rule to that of our Queen, it is simply their way with outsiders, but they do not forget that she is a woman. Sansa will teach them not to underestimate her.”

“I have no doubt of that,” Daenerys allowed a small smile to curve at her lips. She was still coming to know the lady, and while distance remained between them, she was beginning to see her as less of a rival and more of a strong ally. “Lady Stark is strong-willed and unafraid of speaking her mind. I can imagine the Northern Lords will not appreciate those gifts, but I believe they will soon respect it.”

Jon’s head inclined. A crooked grin drew one corner of his mouth up. “You almost sound like you like her?” He knew they had been spending time together, along with Arya and Ser Brienne. It was originally Tyrion’s idea, but with the decisions and ideas that had been coming from those meetings, Jon was not surprised that there was more than dressmaking going on amongst those women.

“I am beginning to understand her,” Daenerys said, “as I think she is beginning to understand me. We would both have peace and will do what we must to achieve that.” She waved off anything else he might believe was occurring. Those conversations would remain behind closed doors.

“You’re starting to like her.” Jon continued to grin, even when she glared at him. He turned back to Bran when her lip curled into a sneer. “Are you sure we cannot change your mind, brother? I feel we have all only just found each other, and now we are being separated again.”

“It will not be forever. The Pack will reunite when it is needed. Sansa will do well in the North, and Arya has always had a roaming spirit. You protect the realms of men, as I serve them. We will be where it is necessary for us to be.” Bran turned his head and glanced at the guard behind him, the man who had been responsible for his care at Winterfell and would remain with him during his travels. “I will go now. I would like to visit the Godswood.”

The Queen’s eyes sparkled with amusement. There were few others who would come and go
without asking her leave. “Thank you for joining us, Lord Stark. Your candor and advice have been most helpful this afternoon.” It amused her to call him that, even when his lips puckered in displeasure, the only sign at all he made of any emotional response.

Jon watched him go before he stood and walked to the balcony overlooking the bay. He was drawn by a familiar screech and stood against the stone parapet. In the distance Drogon looked as small as a bird as he dove toward the water. He felt movement beside him and shifted when Daenerys slipped in to stand between him and the stones. His arms folded around her as they stood together. “How much easier would life be if we were Drogon,” he nodded to where the dragon rose and banked before diving again. “Or even if we were Ghost, or one of Bran’s ravens. They have the right of it, don’t they? Hunt and sleep while we try not to make a mess of the world.”

“You miss him.” She laid her arms over his and leaned against his chest. “You will see him again, Jon. I am sure of it. I will not chain you to my side. There will yet be reason to go North.” She could feel the sadness in him, and knew she would feel much the same were she to be separated by such lengths from Drogon. She could recall how empty she felt when Drogon had left her and she had to keep Rhaegal and Viserion locked away.

“There will be,” he agreed. “This is no place for Ghost, he doesn’t belong here, but aye, I miss him.” Jon laid his cheek against her hair and sighed. “I miss Rhaegal too. It was a weak bond, but I feel its absence. I should have kept him with me.” He wondered if the dragon would have survived had he gone south with the army, instead of flying to Dragonstone with Daenerys.

“I should not have underestimated Cersei,” Daenerys told him. “I should have known that she would attack by sea. Tyrion all but warned me that it would happen. We knew she had the scorpions. I was blinded by my own arrogance. I wanted the throne and I wanted to win. I did not care how. Rhaegal and Missandei both paid for my mistakes.” She turned her head toward him and felt the tickle of his beard against her temple. Daenerys closed her eyes. “We should have wintered in the North, though I do not think your sister would have appreciated my presence at her table much longer.”

“We can’t change the past.” Jon shook his head. “We just have to learn from it. We all made mistakes. The aftermath of the Long Night might not have been the best time to plan our next battle.”

“Hm.” She turned in his arms and wound her arms around him. “Probably not.” A line formed between her brows and for a moment her gaze drifted. “Are we doing the right thing, allowing Cersei to remain alive? I know that we said we would have a trial for her, but I do not think Bran would have warned us if the situation was not serious.”

“Whoever sired it, the child is innocent,” he reminded her. “Do we punish it along with the mother, because she could be a threat?” Jon moved his hands up her back and held her loosely against him.

“What if the child is the threat?” Daenerys looked up at him, eyes wide and concerned. “Will they think me mad if I remove the danger before it becomes one? Cersei was Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, and this child is not the bastard of House Lannister that we thought it was. The child will not be raised in the West by a father that would be loyal to us, loyal to you, and a stepmother that would teach it honor and respect.” She drew a slow breath. “I did not mind so much allowing House Lannister to have the child when I thought my own cousin might be involved somehow. It is one thing for Lord Lannister to raise his own bastard, and quite another for him to be asked to raise the bastard of the lover that betrayed him, even if she was his sister. I do not think they would keep the child close under these circumstances.”

“What if we do not tell them the child is not his?” Jon was not sure that he liked the idea, not truly, but he tried to think of a way that they might still preserve that life while also protecting the peace
they were attempting to create. “If I ask it of him, I think Bran might keep these things to himself.” The words tasted bitter in his mouth as he said them, but had they not learned the power of secrets in saving lives.

“I could not do that.” Daenerys laid her head against his shoulder. She could still hear Drogon’s cries as he circled the bay. It still worried her when he left the dragonpit, but he had to fly and hunt and feel free. A dragon was not a slave. She was not a slave either, not even to her fears. “Ned Stark hid you to protect you, but it was his choice to make. I will not sacrifice the peace of the kingdoms on a lie that could cost us the Westerlands… and the North… and the Stormlands.”

“What do we do then?” He asked, voice hard. “Do we kill a child to protect your rule? Is that what we’ve become now?”

“It isn’t what I want,” she said quietly, “but what was the purpose of Bran’s warning? If there are forces outside Dragonstone moving to unseat me, to free their Queen, would it not be safer for all of us if we allow Cersei to simply… it could be painless, Jon. She could simply go to sleep and not awaken again. The child would die with her, and that would be regrettable, but she would no longer be a threat.”

“When I was newly King,” his voice was a quiet rumble as he tried to make sense of the decisions they were being asked to make. Where did they draw the line between right and wrong, between just and dishonorable, and between ruthless and cruelty? “I had to decide what to do with the Houses that stood against House Stark when we reclaimed Winterfell, the same Houses that betrayed my brother Robb. Sansa wanted me to take their homes and their lands and give them to families that had been loyal. All I could think of was how Winterfell had been taken from us, how we had to fight and people had to die so that we could take it back. I thought of how Sansa had been treated by Joffrey, how they said he had beaten her every time Robb won a battle. They called our father a traitor, they called our brother a traitor, and they punished her for those imagined sins.” Jon drew back, just enough so that he might look into her eyes again. “I wouldn’t do that. I would not punish a son for the things his father had done. Ned Umber was a boy, barely more than a babe, younger even than Bran was when Theon took Winterfell from him. Alys Karstark was a girl, the same age as Sansa when Tywin Lannister married her to Tyrion. They’re both dead now, but I do not regret the choice I made. I’d make it again. If we kill Cersei, we kill the babe, and who is to say that won’t start a war. Who is to say that the Westerlands won’t rise against us anyway? Aye, Lord Jaime might believe Bran, but he needs to put his House in order before we can trust that he has full control of the West.”

She considered his words and felt relief that she would not be asked to make this choice. “We allow the child to be born,” she said, “and hope that it is not a golden Lannister cub. That and Bran Stark’s word will prove our claim that Cersei’s bastard is just that. We take it as a ward of the Crown, as we intended in the beginning, and hope that we do not have to go to battle again before Cersei is executed.”

“It may not be the wisest choice we could make,” he said. He knew the relief she felt, and knew it would be mired with concern that there was more they should do. “I think there are those that would argue in favor of having it done and over. What is wise and what is right is not always the same thing. It is not always easy to tell the difference.”

“That sounds a bit like the difference between being called a mad queen or being called a strong one.” She tipped her head back to smile sadly up at him. “It is a thin line we must walk. We are damned for the choices we make and damned for the ones we do not.” Daenerys drew a breath and let it out slowly, as though that might cleanse her of the worry of the lurking darkness. “We have the throne now, but I believe my uncle was correct. Keeping it, ruling justly and well, that will be the difficult task.”
“That is always the hard part.” He shrugged. “I didn’t even ask to be a King, they thrust it at me, and it was the hardest job I’d ever had in my life.”

“For every decision that we make that our people do not agree with, they threaten to reclaim the loyalty they give.” She craned her head to look out over the bay as Drogon cried out once again. She wondered if he was lonely, or had his days flying across Essos prepared him to be the last true dragon in the world. “It would be easier, I think, to hunt and sleep and fly, and think of nothing else.”

“Aye.” Perhaps that was what they both needed, to not think for a while. He laid a finger beneath her chin and drew her gaze back to him. His dark eyes glittered at her. “I can name another task that might be difficult for us.”

“Oh?” Her brows rose. She sensed the shift in him, from concern and brooding introspection to something lighter, more playful and the corners of her mouth twitched toward a small smile. “What would that be, Jon Stark?”

The way the lilt of her voice dipped, growing deeper, huskier as she teased him sent a flame burning through him. Keeping himself from her had been harder than he thought it might be. He did not want to risk them now, not when they were so close to achieving so much, but he could not deny what his heart wanted, or the way his body answered that call when they were near. Jon let his hands slide down her back to her hips. “It is a bit warm down here, for a northern boy,” he rumbled in a low voice.

Her eyes darkened, growing a deep violet as she drew her hands to his front and slid them to his shoulders. “Well, you do insist on wearing your thick wools and leathers.” He was always dressed in black, and that seemed to suit him, but while the temperatures had grown cooler in the south, they had not seen more than a few light dustings of snow and the beginnings of the winter sea storms. The temperatures were still mild compared to what he had been accustomed to at The Wall. “I will have to think of some way to keep my King from being too warm.”

Jon bowed his head, even as desire had him pulling her closer and sighed. “I am not a king anymore, Dany. We’ve talked about that. I do not want to rule.” He only wanted to keep his family and his people safe. He was meant to serve, not to lead, that was his duty in this life.

She lifted a hand to his cheek and tipped his face up again. “You are my King,” she said again. “You will always be. It matters not to me what others call you. I know that I can trust you, Jon. I will not falter again.”

“I will not give you reason to.” His chest clenched at her words. They had both made mistakes, allowed outside forces to attempt to pull them apart. It had almost been their undoing, and the undoing of those they meant to keep safe. His head dipped and his lips brushed hers. “On my honor, I will not fail you, and I will not abandon you.”

Her mouth curved against his. “Then don’t you think it is time you showed your queen the measure of your devotion?” Her arms moved slowly to curl around his neck. Daenerys arched against him. “I have missed you, Jon. It has been too long.” She ached for him, the strength and warmth of him and the way he seemed to consume her until she forgot all else but the taste and feel and heat of him.

His nose nuzzled her cheek, while his lips teased at hers. Doubt whispered at his mind, for only a moment, before he tossed it aside and swept her into his arms. “As my Queen commands,” he drawled. He turned with her to walk back inside and not even the sounds of a lone dragon, fishing in the bay, could halt his steps.
Love could not be the death of duty, he thought, when his duty was his love.

-TBC-

Chapter End Notes

I went back and forth on this so many times. I felt like going this route might be the easy way, but at the same time, I didn't want Cersei to get that "win", so to speak. Finally, I flipped a coin and this was the result.

Also, my apologies on the delay. Work is crazy, and I was out of town this weekend with my kid for a con. There was also this King!Jaime piece that begged to be started and had my brain in a vise grip until I typed out enough of it to be able to think again. He was very loud and obnoxious, but I have beaten him back into submission for now. LOL

To all the comments & the kudos: Thank you all again, so much!
Lady Lannister of the Rock

It was cold, and wet, and miserable on the day that Lady Genna Lannister arrived in King’s Landing. Yes, they all knew that technically she was a Frey now, and had been for some fifty years, but none of her years spent married to Emmon Frey had done anything to diminish the pride of her family name. As Daven explained it to them, now that Old Walder was dead and gone she refused to answer to anything but Lannister, and Emmon, being the same sulking and nervous man that he had always been, did nothing to dissuade her. Not that she would have listened, even had he tried.

Until her party had entered the city they had not had any warning that she was coming, and it had not been long enough since the announcement of the wedding tourney for Lady Genna and her Lannister host to make it to the capital from Casterly Rock. That could only mean one thing; she had departed the Rock once the outcome of the battle was known. Had it not been for a discreet guard in her service, Jaime was almost certain that his Aunt would have arrived at the Red Keep without anyone being the wiser.

As it was, they had not had even an hour’s worth of notice. Jaime had been in a meeting with the Small Council when the message had arrived. Although their business was not yet concluded, the Queen had given her leave for the Warden of the West to greet the newcomers from House Lannister.

Now he stood in the misting rain while a cold wind blew, leaving him damp and making his stump ache while he watched the wagons and wheel houses arrive. Jaime cut a glance at Daven beside him and wondered just how large a retinue Aunt Genna had brought with her. A good twenty riders had entered the yard ahead of the first wheel house, riding in pairs, followed by six more and yet another, smaller wheel house. There were wagons and additional soldiers, and for just a moment he worried that she had emptied the Rock before riding east.

Jaime forced a neutral expression, however, but once the first carriage came to a stop a tight smile curved his lips. He was fond of his aunt, truly, but the unexpected arrival was offsetting his plans, and the last thing he really wanted was more of his family in the city within easy reach of a Targaryen sovereign, especially one with a dragon and a history of burning her enemies. It was possible that he was being irrational about that, more than one person had told him as much of late, but while lions did not concern themselves with the opinions of the sheep, a dragon was hardly a sheep, and that was an opinion he would certainly be keeping an eye on.

Movement on his right side caught his eye and Jaime glanced over to find Ser Addam Marbrand moving in step beside him as he walked down to greet the woman that was emerging from inside the carriage. He had sent for both Daven and Addam as soon as he had received the news, though as Warden a pair of Lannister guards flanked most of his movements. He didn’t know either of them, and couldn’t remember their names, but Daven had appointed them and he trusted his cousin. That hadn’t stopped him from wanting his two closest and oldest friends present for this meeting.

In her youth it was said that Genna Lannister had been one of the most beautiful women in all the Westerlands, and for as long as Jaime had known her she had been a loud, plump, and boisterous woman. In her sixties, she was still a handsome woman, despite her generous girth. For Jaime she had been the one to soothe hurts and encourage dreams, at least when his father was not present to witness it. He would not have approved of such weakness. If Jaime were truthful with himself, he didn’t think that he or Tyrion would have survived their childhoods without her.

Jaime came to a stop before her and bowed gallantly. “Aunt Genna.”
Her green gaze was shrewd and quickly calculating. “I see you managed to survive both the Starks and your sister.” Genna’s eyes narrowed as she took in his appearance. He wore leather and expensive fabrics in brown and blue. When had her proud Lannister nephew stopped wearing red, she wondered. “Tell me true, Daven, is he free of her or are we having him sent back to the Rock under guard?” She pointed a finger at the eldest, and favorite, of her nephews with a scowl. “I’ll do it Jaime. I will have Ty and Damon truss you up like one of Crakehall’s prized boars and haul you back to Casterly Rock. They will put you under lock and guard until I decide you’ve finally got your head on straight or until one of us dies, mark my words, my boy, I will do it.”

She was not even five minutes out of her carriage, had not even bothered to greet him and surely did not care that he was head of the family now, before she began to lecture him. With her flashing green eyes and a hand resting on her ample hip while she shook her finger at him, Jaime could almost be a boy of nine again, being lectured because he and Tyrion had tricked their cousin Cleos into playing with them in the mines underneath the Rock… before they had abandoned him there. He suspected she would pinch his ear soon, just as she had been doing since he was little more than a babe.

A smile, wide and bright, and happier than any that most people saw spread across his face. His eyes lit, sparkling like the green waters of the Sunset Sea beneath the burning, western sun. Jaime took a step forward and bent his head toward her. He took her small, wrinkled hands in his own and pressed a kiss to her cheek. When he lifted his head again, just a fraction, he met her gaze. “Cersei is imprisoned at Dragonstone, and I am here, serving our Queen.” He gave that just a moment to sink in before he added, “It gladdens me to see you again.”

Genna’s eyes narrowed just a bit further while her lips pursed. She cast a quick, but not entirely subtle look over his left shoulder. She sighed when Daven nodded and allowed herself to relax. Her face softened into a fond smile. “I had hoped there was enough of your father in you that good sense might prevail at some point.” She loosened one of her hands from his and reached up to pat his cheek, smirking a bit at the amount of gray that was salted through his golden beard. “You’re beginning to look a little more like Tygett these days, though.”

“Really?” He reached up and stroked his own jaw. “I thought surely I had ranked a Gerion by now.” Jaime grinned crookedly at her. “Not even a little bit?”

She smiled and gave his cheek another pat before pulling away. “You were always a handsome boy, my love, but you’ll never be that handsome.”

“I’m not sure his bride would agree.” Daven flashed a teasing smirk, even as he drew a scowl from his cousin.

“Bride?” Genna’s brows shot toward her hairline. She had the pleasure of watching her nephew look back at her and then smile sheepishly. Her head tilted speculatively. “That girl you rode north for?”

Jaime’s eyes widened. He blinked several times. “How did…” He shook his head. Aunt Genna knew everything, of course, and he rolled his eyes when she smirked at him. “Betrothed,” he reminded Daven, “not bride, not yet. There’s still time for her to come to her bloody senses, unfortunately.”

“Good thing I’ve arrived then,” Genna decided. “Imagine my ire had I gotten here after the fact, considering all the time and trouble your father went to trying to get you to wed before. The least I can do is see the deed done.” She brushed her hands down over her skirts and looked around them. That was all of it, then, people and wagons. “Ty,” she snapped her fingers at her eldest grandson, “you’re with me, bring Joy along. Willem, you’ll stay and make sure these fools don’t muddle the unloading.” She turned back to Jaime without missing hardly a beat. “Let’s get this lot in out of the rain and see what we can do to salvage the family name.”
“The family name is rather beyond repair, I think,” Jaime grimaced. “Has been for some time, if we’re all honest about it.” He turned and allowed her to precede him into the Keep. “Though I have a small amount of hope that my future wife might be able to help repair matters. She certainly brings enough alliances with her, and then there is the matter of her honor.”

“You sound like a besotted fool,” Genna told him, and none too gently. “I will need to meet this paragon of virtue that has so entranced my nephew who once swore he would never marry for anything but love. A foolish notion if you ask me.”

“Something you and father had in common,” Jaime drawled. “I fear you will have to be disappointed then.” Once they had gained the inside of the Keep, they came to a stop in one of the wide corridors. The steward would have been sent for and would have some idea where he was to house this lot. They would need to wait for him to find them.

“Our Jaime has always been one for foolish notions,” Daven reminded her, “but it’s true, he weds for love, the lucky bastard. She will not even look twice at me, nor Addam, and Lyle has taken to writing songs of her swordplay.” He grinned at the glare his cousin cast in his direction.

“He exaggerates,” Jaime grit out, “or at least he had best be. I may have some fondness for the three of you but I have cut down other men for lesser offenses.”

“Hm.” Genna cast a look at the young, golden haired woman who had come to stand close to her left side. “This is what happens when men are left too long unattended, my love. They turn into simpering fools.”

The girl’s laughter was soft and musical. “Yes, I see that. It really is too bad it took so long to reach them. You were right, when left to their own devices Jaime and Daven would make a mockery of us all, if their foolishness did not get them killed first.”

Jaime’s eyes narrowed for a moment before widening in shock. “Joy?” He glanced at his aunt for confirmation, and once he had it, he took a step forward. “Little Joy? When did you get so tall? The last I saw of you, you were barely tall enough to reach Tyrion’s knee.”

She demurred politely when he placed a kiss upon her cheek. “That is what happens when you do not visit, cousin. The children grow up and you forget all about them.” She pouted at him. “You did not even write.”

The look was familiar enough to send a chill down his spine. With her pouting lips and sparkling green eyes she looked entirely too much like Cersei for his liking. Jaime pushed all of that aside, however, and recalled that his uncle’s bastard daughter had always been a sweet girl who sought nothing more than to lose herself in the stories of the books Tyrion gave her or among the horses in the stables. “I have been a terrible cousin, I know, but alas… it has been difficult to write these past few years,” he lifted his right hand and the gold gleamed in the dim light of the corridor.

Joy’s eyes dimmed immediately. Even Genna grimaced and looked away from the thing, but his cousin took his hand in hers with a sigh. “Yes, hearing of it pained me. Tyrion wrote to me of it, is it true that you lost it defending a woman from a hoard of outlaws?”

Leave it to Tyrion to paint him as the tragically romantic hero in his own terrible story. Jaime couldn’t help but smile. Joy was still the sweet girl that he remembered. He shook off his own demons and saw in her the woman that Myrcella might have become, had their sins not destroyed her. “A terrible hoard,” he said, “there were dozens of them, and there was indeed a woman. She was brave and strong, but there were too many of them. I would do it again, with the same outcome, if it meant saving her.”
While Genna rolled her eyes, none of them missed the amused smirk that twisted her lips. Daven shook his head. “Lucky it is that she agreed when you asked for her hand, coz, for you had already given her yours.”

“She’s the one?” Joy’s eyes widened with excitement at the thought. “The one you saved, she is the one you’re going to wed? All these years later? She waited that long?”

Would that they could all be so young and full of hope and romance. Jaime could not bring himself to dash her excitement, however, and simply nodded. “Well, I had to prove myself worthy, did I not?”

Ty and a couple of the other men snickered, but Joy ignored them. Boys simply could not understand what real love was, what it meant to be accepted for who you were and not your name, your House, or the status of your birth. “Tell me, cousin, is she very beautiful?”

Jaime leaned forward, and while his young cousin’s face was filled with such hope and longing, he could think only of a pair of astonishing blue eyes. “There will never be another more so,” he said, and knew that Joy would understand once she had met Brienne. Like Tyrion, Joy had only ever wanted to be loved and accepted, but she had been the family’s shame instead, however fond of her many of them had been. In that moment, as he watched Joy’s eyes widen and heard her sigh, he knew he could not do it. He could not give her to Willas Tyrell. He would not trade her in payment of his sins. He would ask the Queen to legitimize her, because it was right, but she would wed for love, or not at all.

“Oh honestly.” Genna scoffed at both of them. “The two of you and your nonsense. All we are missing now is Tyrion with one of his silly stories of knights and dragons.” Though she admonished them, her eyes were lit with fondness. Would that Gerion had not left on his foolish quest, that he had seen the woman his girl had grown into. That he could have been there to help temper Tywin’s more ruthless nature. She wondered if their House would have fallen quite so far, so quickly, had he been.

“I think Tyrion can do better than stories these days,” Jaime told them. He straightened as the mention of his brother was met with grim silence. “I think we will save that meeting for later.” He had been quite worried at seeing their aunt again, all things considered. Jaime gave the top of Joy’s hand a pat before he let her go. “Who else have you brought with you? I dare say it looks like most of the Rock was in your retinue.”

“For good or ill someone was going to have to bend the knee,” his aunt told him, “I decided it might as well be me, if we had any hope at all of keeping it all in the family. I had hoped your brother might do that much, considering his own crimes against this family.” She had not forgotten that the boy she helped raise had murdered his own father, and she would not allow him to forget that fact either. They would have that discussion, whether Tyrion liked it or not. “I left my Walder in charge with old Maester Donal to assist him. That fool Emmon has gone north to press his rights at the Twins.” She rolled her eyes. “He’s as like to get himself killed along the way, and I told him so. The fool is welcome to it, but I’ll have no part of it all, and neither will any of the children.”

Jaime’s brows rose in surprise. Next to him Daven was amused. “You left a Frey in charge of the rock? I’m surprised father hasn’t already risen from his grave to smite us all.”

Genna clucked her tongue at him. “Red Walder has always been more Lannister than Frey, my boy, all of them were… except for Cleos, perhaps. He was his father’s foolish son, gods rest his soul, but the rest were mine and I am thankful for that. The grandchildren too, now that that fool Jeyne has seen her last summer.” If Ty grimaced at the mention of his late mother, he was wise enough not to contradict his grandmother’s opinion of her.
“I suppose that is true enough,” Jaime agreed. He exchanged a look with Addam, who lingered behind the group. Red Walder was so named for the color of his bright copper hair. It was said he looked more Marbrand than Lannister or Frey, and in truth, many wondered how many of the sons his loud and boisterous Aunt had given Emmon Frey were, in truth, Emmon’s. She was right that Cleos had been Frey enough, but Tion and Lionel had been golden lions and he suspected there was not a drop of Frey in either of them. As to his aunt’s youngest and last surviving son, it had been whispered he was the get of Damon Marbrand, Ser Addam’s own lord father. They would likely never know for sure, and Emmon had claimed them all, too afraid of his Lannister relatives to do anything else.

“I’ve brought Ty and Willem with me, they are unlike to inherit anything and can hope only for a knighthood and decent enough placement to make good matches for themselves. They’ll remain here at court, you and your brother will see to them,” she commanded. “Luckily for all of us, they are more Lannister than Frey.”

That was true enough, at least in looks. Jaime’s eyes narrowed as he studied young Tywin. His hair was more blond than brown, straight where his father’s had been stringy. He had, at least, not inherited that weak chin, and seemed to have come by some of his grandfather’s height; the Lannister grandfather, thank gods, for they all knew that Emmon’s spine was as weak in truth as it was in nature. “How old are you now, boy?”

Ty straightened and met his cousin’s piercing gaze. “Seven and ten, my lord, just these past few moons. Willem will be six and ten in the next moon,” he offered, before it could be asked.

“A bit old to still be a squire.” Although he supposed judging it by his own standards was unfair, not everyone could be knighted on the field of battle by a member of the Kingsguard at the age of five and ten. His lips pursed while he considered the boy. He was long and lean, and his chin lifted with pride, but not over much. “I shall hope that you will do a better job than the two squires I already have.” He heard Daven snicker and cast a look at him, brow rising. “You take Willem into your service, coz. It’s time you began training someone, and perhaps with a squire you might remember what it is to have a regular hair cut.”

Daven, whose long golden mane was legendary amongst their troops and family, simply shrugged. “Train him I will, but cut this hair and I’ll look ordinary and a bit too much like you for my own liking.”

Jaime opened his mouth to respond but stayed his words with the arrival of the steward. Rooms had been found for his aunt and cousin in the Maidenvault and were being prepared for them. Ty and Willem would have lesser quarters near the barracks, where the rest of the host would reside. The maids and servants they had brought with them would reside in the servants’ quarters near the kitchens. Jaime turned to his new squire with that news. “Go and help your brother get everyone settled. Daven, will you see to it that Aunt Genna and Cousin Joy are escorted to the Maidenvault. We will give them some time to rest and freshen up.” In the meantime he would find his brother and his betrothed. They should probably arrange a dinner, though Lannister family dinners did not have a history of being especially enjoyable.

Genna nodded, satisfied with the plan for the afternoon. “You will bring Tyrion to me before dinner,” she told him. “I will speak with my nephew before anything else is done or decided.”

He suppressed a weary sigh. “I will,” Jaime knew he could do nothing else, and truthfully he was conditioned to follow the commands of that tone. He wondered where she and his father had learned it, by all accounts it could not have come from their own father; Tytos Lannister had been known for being a friendly, gullible fool. “Ty, after this lot is settled, you’ll come and find me,” he told his
cousin. “Ladies…” He bowed his head to both of them before he turned to stride away. Jaime waited until he was well out of earshot before glancing at Addam, who had fallen in step beside him. “How long, do you think, before she takes over the entirety of court?”

“An hour, at least,” Addam grinned. “She might take her time at it, the Dragon Queen is an unknown element, but I don’t think that will stay her hand for long. Give her a few days and it wouldn’t shock me to find the dragon eating out of her palm and purring like a kitten.”

Jaime snorted a laugh. “That’s what frightens me. Imagine Genna with one of those beasts at her command. The lot of us would be done for, surely.”

“The kingdoms would never be the same.” Addam chuckled, but sobered after a moment. “What do you think she will do with Tyrion?”

“That is anyone’s guess,” he sighed. “She knew what father was like, as well as any of us, but she loved him and Tyrion took him from her.” Jaime shook his head. “I cannot say, old friend. I know he has worried over it, but none of us expected she would come to court. I think he thought he would never have to face her, or if he did it would be on his own terms.” His brother had left Westeros a fugitive and returned Hand to the Queen, and now sat the Small Council as Master of Laws. Tyrion was hardly without his own power and influence, but Genna Lannister was a force to be reckoned with, and reckon with them she would.

Tyrion, as it happened, was not as difficult to find as they might have thought. He had remained in the Council chambers after the meeting’s conclusion, the Queen with him, along with Ser Davos and Lord Stark. As they approached the open door, flanked as it was by two guards, they heard the Queen’s voice from within, lilting softly and with compassion.

“My own brother was killed by my husband, did his relation make his death any less deserved for his crimes? He would have killed me and cut my son from my belly. He was lost to madness, though I grieved for him. Surely your aunt is not so without reason that she cannot understand the terrible things your father had done.”

“She understands well enough,” Tyrion replied, “the problem is that Aunt Genna is more Lannister than either Jaime or myself. It does not do for the lions to turn on their own and will not be allowed to go unpunished.” He sighed as he poured another cup of wine from the side table in the room. “I am in for the lecture of my life, I believe.”

“You and I both.” Jaime strode into the room with Addam behind him and draped himself across a chair with a heavy sigh. “She’s brought almost the whole of the Rock with her, which means Aunt Genna has come prepared for war.” He glanced at his queen, “family war, not the other sort. You are perfectly safe, but I dare say you’ll be needing a new Master of Laws and Warden of the West before it is all said and done.”

“A pity,” The queen looked down her nose at him. “I was so looking forward to your continued service, and whatever shall I do when my dear cousin is mourning your loss.” Her head turned and she arched a brow at Jon beside her. “Should we arrange another match for her straight away? We could relieve her grieving heart by finding her a better husband. Your friend Tormund, I think.”

While the Queen’s eyes glittered happily, Jaime bared his teeth at her. “It is a cruel hearted queen you have brought us, brother. Whatever were you thinking?”

“That you needed a better to keep you in line,” the little man regained his own seat and studied the contents of his cup. “Who else to tame a lion than a dragon, fear not, dearest brother, her bite is far worse than her fire.” His head tilted in thought. “Is she especially cross?”
Jaime stared blandly at his brother. “I now have a third squire, what do you think?” He shook his head. “I am to bring you to her before dinner so that she might discuss the matter with you herself. That means that you are to be chastised for your actions, and I for allowing them.” Jaime shrugged. “Congratulations, brother, we are once again children caught with our hands in the honeypot.”

Daenerys rolled her eyes at both of them. “I honestly cannot believe I am witnessing this. The two of you, cowed by an old woman.” She folded her hands in her lap and leaned forward. “Are you not the man who walked into a crypt with two nearly grown dragons,” she said to her former Hand, “the man who stood within an arm’s length of both of them to free their chains. How many times have you looked me in the eye to tell me that I was wrong, and this old woman that you have not seen in some years has you frightened?” Before he could answer she turned to his brother who sat on the other side of the table. “And you.” Her lip curled, as it usually did when faced with her least favorite Lannister. Well, probably not the least, there was also his sister to consider. “Where is the man that slew his king? Where is the knight who took up a spear and charged a fully-grown and enraged dragon on the field of battle? Are the two of you lions or a pair of common house kittens!”

Tyrion’s lips pursed. He cast a look across the table at his brother and ignored the snickering of the other men. “She has a point. We are men grown, battle hardened and brave. What could Aunt Genna possibly do to either of us that we have not yet faced? We survived an entire army of the dead.”

“I think I would rather the army of the dead,” Jaime muttered. He straightened in his seat with a nod. “A point, though I am unsure how good it is. We will stand before the lioness and come out of the meeting unscathed.” He paused a moment before adding. “I will bring Brienne.”

While Davos roared with laughter and Tyrion’s face fell into his hand, Jon shook his head at them, amusement sparkling in his eyes. The Queen simply sighed, her disappointment evident. “I think I shall have your House sigil changed to that of a lion cub dressed in motley.”

“I’m not sure that would be far from the truth,” Jaime lamented. “If any of you had met our Aunt, you would not begrudge us so. Addam, tell them.” He waved a hand at his old friend.

“She is a fierce old lioness,” the knight explained. “It is said she once told Lord Tywin to his face that he was a fool and the man did not speak to her for half a year for fear she spoke true. She has ruled the Rock these many years in Tywin’s absence, and only the threat of your Unsullied sent her from its walls. She took shelter with the family at Ashermark until your armies had abandoned the castle for the journey north. Then she reclaimed it and saw to the repairs. When old Lord Walder Frey made demands of his Lannister relatives, she told him he had given a son to House Lannister and that was all the alliance he would ever have of the matter. Cersei sat the throne, but Genna ruled the Westerlands,” Addam shrugged, “she and Daven kept the truth of the family’s wealth from Cersei’s spies and kept in garrison only what was needed to protect the Rock and the family, so that the army not be conscripted to her niece’s foolish endeavors, her words,” he said to Jaime, “or so it is said.”

“You’d have had that from Daven’s own mouth,” he nodded. “I trust you both well enough. The ledgers I have seen speak to it. From what I have learned my father and uncle Kevan developed a means of keeping account of the stores and coffers that would keep the truth of it from my grandfather and his many mistresses, lest he squander it as he had much of the family’s wealth. From what Daven tells me, Genna helped them devise it, and knows the secret of it well enough. They continued the practice after Uncle Kevan died to continue concealing the Rock’s value from Cersei…” He sighed, “and from me.”

“Then what you are telling me is that your aunt is shrewd, intelligent, and formidable.” Daenerys nodded. “Then I shall meet this woman and have the measure of her myself. It seems to me she will
understand well enough that your father’s crimes could not go unpunished, and better it be at his son’s hands than mine. I might have pardoned you for the death of my father, but I would not have been so lenient to Lord Tywin where the deaths of my brother’s children were concerned.”

Jaime grimaced. He knew well it would have been the flames for his father and that was a terrible way to go. The thought sickened him, but he nodded. “I cannot say I would have argued over much, probably to the means of execution. I have seen too many men burn,” he admitted, “but the children were innocent. It was a crime for which I never forgave him.” He shook his head and sat straighter in his chair, “though I know now he was not wholly responsible. That you can add to Cersei’s list of crimes. I’ve had it from Bran himself.”

Daenerys looked surprised. He was being unusually circumspect. She knew well that he did not know the other crime that his sister had committed, because Jon had not yet told him of it. She shared a look with her lover and he shook his head, confirming what she already knew. There had not yet been time for that meeting. It would have to come sooner rather than later, it seemed. Her brow arched and she saw Jon nod in response. They would have it done today, before the unexpected arrival of the Lannister matriarch, however self-styled the title may be, could otherwise put a wrinkle in all of their planning. They would also have to ascertain that this was not the threat that Bran had warned them of.

The Queen placed her hands against the arms of her chair and rose slowly. “I will leave you to the matters of your own family, but I expect those matters to be resolved quickly. I will not have members of my Small Council providing gossip for the court. That is the last thing we need so soon in our rule. If you cannot handle your own family doings, then I shall do so for you…” The Queen turned, even as they rose in response to her departure. She strode from the room, two of her guards falling in step to flank her. “…and if I must, Lord Lannister, it shall be a cub in motley for your House henceforth!”

“I am going to need stronger wine than this if I am to face the lioness.” Tyrion set his cup aside and turned from the table. “A Dornish, I think, the strongest one I can find in the Keep’s cellars. Surely our sweet sister did not drink it all!”

“Lord Jaime,” Jon called him back when he made to follow, “a word, if you will.” He grimaced, for it would not be a pleasant conversation.

Jaime glanced at Addam and gestured for him to go with his brother. Someone would need to make sure that Tyrion was not stumbling drunk when at last he stood before Aunt Genna. He waited until they’d gone before turning back to his Prince, who would remain the Prince in his mind, whatever his current title might be. “What can I do for you, my Lord?”

Jon glanced at Ser Davos, who seemed prepared to leave himself. “Stay,” he told the older man, “we may have use of your counsel.” It would be a boon to have him near, for the news he had to impart would be difficult to hear. They might both find themselves in need of the old Onion Knight’s wisdom. “Sit,” Jon waived both of them back to their chairs while he took his own. “I have had an audience with Bran, and his report was rather disturbing…”

-TBC-
Darkest hearts

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

He did not present himself for dinner with his aunt, and no one had seen him since his audience with Lord Jon. Brienne went in search of him, even before Tyrion sent word that his brother was missing and like to do something foolish, if Ser Davos’s accounting of his mood was any indication. She found him in the White Sword Tower, which had gone unoccupied while Daenerys took her time in selecting a new Queensguard.

Somehow that did not come as a surprise to Brienne.

She did not expect to find him sitting in the dark, only a single cluster of candles burning at the center of the table in the Lord Commander’s solar. He was seated at that table and staring, somewhat morosely, at the thick white Book of Brothers. A mostly empty flagon of wine was in front of him, and from the way he slumped in his chair and the bleariness of his eyes when he finally raised them to look at her, she could tell that it was not the first he’d had.

“We were beginning to think we should send an army in search of you,” she moved closer to the table, slowly, though she could not say exactly why. There was something about him that was dangerous, something that she had not seen in quite some time. “I heard your Aunt arrived with a host from Casterly Rock. Your brother expected you to join them for dinner.”

He bared his teeth at the slight admonishment in her tone. He supposed it was unconscionably rude of him to stand them up. Jaime leaned forward and grasped the flagon of wine. The red liquid sloshed over the rim of his cup as he refilled it. “I had better things to do than spend the eve with my family. They’re a vile, treacherous lot, did you know?”

“I have heard it is a fool that will trust the Lannisters, but I have spent most of my time in the North of late.” She squinted in the dim room to regard him more carefully. “Most I have met are not so terrible.”

“Most.” He sneered at her. “Your courtesies, as usual, do not fail you, Lady Brienne. Did you practice them as a girl, until they come naturally, or is it just that you’re so damn polite you cannot speak an ill word even when you agree.”

A wounded animal was a dangerous one, and something had put him in this mood. Just that morning he had been jovial, unwilling even to let her leave their chambers… for in truth he hardly ever returned to those assigned to him. Brienne sighed as she circled the table. She moved the flagon of wine out of his reach, though most of what remained was already in his cup. “If you want to fight, Jaime, you can sober up and I will put a sword in your hand, otherwise you can speak plainly. I have no need of your word games.”

“No, you don’t, do you?” Jaime slumped back in his chair and continued to stare at her with narrowed, glittering eyes. “That was what I always liked most about you. Even when you hardly spoke to me, I knew when the words came they would have meaning and it would be true, even if I didn’t like what I heard.” He let his head rest against the hard wood of the high-backed chair that had once held the weight of Ser Barristan Selmy, and then himself, and would soon belong to another. “If I had left you behind at Winterfell without a word, as I was tempted to do, and you had come to me later, a child in your arms, I wouldn’t have to question it was mine. I would know, not just because you cannot lie to save even your own hide, but you wouldn’t try, not for any reason, and not
to me.”

“No,” she agreed, “I would not.” She frowned as she sat. Her hands itched to touch him, but she thought better of it. He was bitter and angry, and she could not think of why. “But there isn’t. We were careful at Winterfell, perhaps not as well as we should have been, but careful enough. We’ve been less so here, but such a child does not exist.” It did not bother her, as it might another. They had already accepted that they would either have heirs, or they would not, and there was nothing they could do to change that outcome. She was not a woman to wait and bemoan each turn of the moon, or worry over much about things that were well out of her hands.

“More’s the pity,” he whispered. Jaime stared at her, and the longing he felt cut deeply. It was an ache that went to the very center of his soul. His jaw clenched at the emotion that welled in his chest. The pain of it rose to fill his throat. “She lied. The babe she carries is not mine. It should be a relief…” Part of him was relieved. He was free of her, finally and completely, and there was nothing left to bind them together. He could move forward with his life without the shadow of Cersei to hang over his head. There would not even be a child to remind him of his past sins, but there was the other part of him… that part of him that had loved her so completely he would have been anything, done anything just to please her, and it grieved for the lie, for the truth that had been laid bare before him. He had loved her, but she had never loved him. Jaime shook his head and looked away from her, shame suddenly filling him. “I should not tell you this.”

“Then who would you tell?” Brienne leaned forward and touched his jaw, fingers feather soft, despite the callouses from long hours of training and swordplay. It pained her to hear it, to see him like this, but she had known who he was when she gave herself to him. She had always known.

“Your brother has his own conflicted thoughts on the matter and I do not think the rest of your family would understand.” She turned his face back toward her and drew her nails lightly through the gold and gray whiskers that covered his cheek and chin before she pulled her arm back to her side and draped it across her lap. Her brows lifted as she watched him. “How did you find out?”

“Bran.” He watched her blink, saw the understanding. Jaime lifted his cup and drank deep, hoped the wine would chase away the burning in his chest that began with her easy acceptance. Why was she so good? Why was she even there? How is it that she could love him, knowing all that she did? Was it some form of pity? Or did she truly think she could not do better. Certainly she knew better than that now, for half the men in his army were besotted with her. “The Raven is worried that my sweet sister might yet find a way to betray us,” he said thickly, barely able to form the words with the wine and the emotions that were filling him. “He gave the warning to Jon and the Queen. The former told me that which he thought might most concern me. He was right.” His lip curled in disgust. “When a man is fucking his sister he wants to know when she’s a lying whore.”

She winced at his crass words, but did not admonish him for them. “Then she thought to use the child to keep you at her side, but you left anyway.” It was said simply enough, but she could understand how the truth might have been hurtful. He had believed her, had asked for mercy on the basis of that child’s existence. He had come back, willing to die, to try and find a way to keep Cersei and Daenerys from destroying each other, not only for the innocents in the city, but for that child.

“I left her anyway.” His laughter, when it came, was hollow and cruel and echoed off the empty walls around them. “She knew before I did, that I was going to go. I think that’s why she didn’t have Ser Gregor kill me in the end. She couldn’t believe I had actually done it, even when she saw it coming.” Jaime watched her frown, saw the confusion, and waved his unadorned stump in her direction. “Cersei knew I would ride North to you at some point, what I have a hard time figuring out is when she realized what I only started to fully understand in the dragonpit.” He snorted. “I truly am the stupidest Lannister.”
Brienne shook her head at him. “Your sister was always perceptive, but I cannot see what any of this, her choices or her lies, have to do with me. She had already told you of the child before I saw you again. We had been parted for some months, and our meeting at Riverrun was brief.” Brief and painful. It had haunted her for months afterward. She had ached for the grief she saw in him then, for the darkness she could see clawing at his soul and the honor he tried so hard to hold on to. She had wanted to go back, to take him from that place, find some way of keeping him safe… but that had not been her path or her duty.

“You truly are too good for any of us,” he said quietly, fondly. Jaime stared at her and thought the weight of his love might crush him. “Riverrun, yes… that might be when she started to see it. It couldn’t be before then, she was too grieved at Joffrey’s loss to understand anything but her own want of revenge. I don’t even know if she ever realized you had gone, she certainly didn’t know that I got you out of the city to keep you from harm. Making Tyrion pay for Joffrey’s death was all she cared about, and then all of us were consumed by Father’s murder. You were just a footnote to Cersei by then, and I was glad of that.”

The line drawing her brows together only deepened. “You said at Riverrun you never thought I’d find Sansa.” It made sense now that was not why he had sent her away. Brienne sighed at him. “I did not require your protection, Jaime. I had done nothing to earn the Queen’s ire, even if she thought I had more care for you than I should.”

“More care than you should,” he repeated, but the goofy grin that turned the corners of his mouth upwards did not reach his eyes. “You did not say that she thought you had more care for me than you did.” He pointed his cup at her. “I think you loved me, even then, wench. Even if you didn’t need my protection, you still took the sword and the armor, and the squire. Most people would have already considered us betrothed at that point.”

“Most people say you are a fool,” she told him, “but that does not always mean it is true.” Brienne took the wine cup from his hand and set it away from him. “I think you have had enough of that, you are speaking nonsense.”

Jaime rolled his eyes at her. “I didn’t love you then,” he sighed. “I don’t think.” He frowned, not sure where his thoughts had been going. “I didn’t think of you at all, most of the time.” His thoughts would occasionally wander to her and he would long to know where she was and how she was doing. He could not even stand vigil over his father’s corpse without his thoughts going to the Maid of Tarth. Stray thoughts that he could not control, but always they were fleeting. “Not until that bloody island. Why does the passage from King’s Landing to Dorne require a trip past Tarth anyway?” He scowled darkly. “Fuck. Of course she figured it out after that. I couldn’t save Myrcella and I wondered if I had sent you to your death on a fool’s errand. Sansa was surely already dead, Arya’s bones were scattered somewhere in Flea Bottom, for all I knew, and I had as sure as murdered you by sending you off on that fucking quest.”

He stumbled out of his chair and swayed alarmingly for a moment. Brienne was tempted to follow him, to reach for him, but his mood had gone sour again. She watched him stalk around the room, bumping into tables and chairs while he paced. The rapid shifts in his mood were troubling, but she supposed it was to be expected with the news he had received. He would brood and retreat into self-loathing. He would go to that place where he blamed himself for the failures of everyone he loved and hated himself for those he could not save. “Jaime.” His name was a sigh on her lips. Brienne gripped the arms of her chair and watched him stumble. “What might have happened to me after I left the city would not have been your fault. I chose to go.”
“I chose to let you.” His lip curled in derision. He moved to the sideboard, where the stand for Oathkeeper had been, and leaned against it. “I came back from Riverrun with my head filled with you. Not just my head, but only Cersei could see it. I’m too stupid, you understand. I found the Sept burning, my son dead, and my sister on the throne, and all I could think of was how disappointed you would be that I had allowed it to happen. Then word started to trickle south of the great battle at Winterfell. I knew you had been headed back there, and there was no true accounting for when it happened or who was involved, but I know you.” His eyes burned with remembered fear and grief. “I know you travel fast when you can, and you would not have tarried getting back to your Lady. Every bit of news we received told us that most of the Stark forces had perished. Only the forces from the Vale and a few wildlings brought south of the wall remained. I let you leave Riverrun and I sent you to your death, again. How many times did a man have to murder a woman before he finally rid his soul of her?” He lurched away from the sideboard and stumbled back to the table to lean over it. “Cersei knew, of course she did. There had never been a time before I met you that I was not willing to fall into her bed at a moment’s notice, but after…” He shook his head. “She told me when we first got back that I had taken too long and I railed at her for it. I hated her for it. Everything changed, and when I came back from Riverrun she knew I wasn’t hers anymore. Going to her bed was a habit I couldn’t break, but it wasn’t a place I sought. Our children were dead, our father was dead, what was there to keep us together? To keep me at her side when she knew I was sending spies north to try and find out what had become of you after the battle with the Boltons.”

Her head shook, while her lips parted soundlessly. Brienne blinked up at him. He had been sending spies north? He had never said, never told her that he had any concern at all about what might have happened to her after Riverrun. They had never talked of it. It was just another point in their history, another moment among far too few when they had too little time and she had wished later she had said more. Her heart fluttered and then beat wildly while she drew a shaky breath. “You thought me dead?” The words were whispered and she saw the truth of them in the grief in his eyes. “At the dragonpit...” He had barely acknowledged her, had seemed as though he could not wait to be away from her.

“She knew I was going to leave. Even the promise of the child could not hold me here,” he rasped thickly, “and the only satisfaction I had out of any of it was knowing that you would be safe traveling north with the Queen’s host.” What he hadn’t known until later was that Brienne and Podrick had traveled alone, and much faster than the larger host. He’d have worried had he known, but it came as no surprise to him. It was her preferred means of travel. She could much more easily make up the distance between King’s Landing and Winterfell when left to her own devices.

“You never told me any of this.” Her hands were locked almost painfully around the arms of her chair. “Not once did you ever—”

“I already don’t deserve you,” he said. The pain in his eyes was a reflection of his tormented soul. “I was already a man whose honor was shit, so far beyond repair none of the good deeds I could dream of would ever pull me from the muck. You’ve heard every one of my sins, and there isn’t a thing you could do to save me if all of them were ever let out into the open. How could I let you know that I could not even remain faithful to my own sister, even if it was just my mind that was betraying her? All those years,” he shook his head, “I lay with my sister, all the while I saw men whoring and drinking, betraying their wives and their vows, and told myself that I was still better than them because there had only ever been one woman for me. Just her, year after year, and my mind and my body, and my heart did not stray. Not until there was you. In the deepest moments of my pain and despair, you told me to live so that I could take revenge. I lived, but when I woke it was as though you had climbed inside my head. I saw the world through your eyes, and for the first time since I put that sword through Aerys’s back, I knew again what was wrong and right, just and honorable. That did not change all the wrong I had done. It was a miracle I could even get you to speak to me again after what happened at the dragonpit, much less defend me the way you did at Winterfell. Do you
not see? Cersei had to lie to me to keep me at her side and I was too stupid to see through it, because I was too stupid to realize that I spent my whole life doing her bidding and never once, ever, in all that time did she love me. I have killed, lied, stolen, broken oaths, and given up my life to the Kingsguard, all for her. The only thing I would not give up for her was you, so Cersei used the only weapon she had, and I was so stupid I didn’t see I was falling into the same trap I helped her lay for Robert thrice before.”

“Stop it.” His pain was too much for her to bear. She rose from the chair and moved swiftly to his side. She took his face in her hands and felt the shudder that ran through him to the very center of her soul. “You are not stupid,” she told him, “blind, perhaps, occasionally foolish, but you are not the idiot that you paint yourself. You loved her, wholly, fully, and she used that love. It was selfish and unhealthy, and yes, many of your deeds are beyond comprehension and repair, but I have seen the good in you.” His arms hung limply at his sides but his eyes, when he looked up at her, they were almost her undoing. His sister would be his end, she had always known that. “Do not let her pull you down again,” she whispered, pleading. “I am sorry she hurt you. I am sorry she has taken this from you, again. And I am sorry that I cannot promise you a child, but I will not let you destroy yourself on the altar of the pain she has caused you. You are more than your sister’s creature. You have people who love and respect you.”

His arms lifted to wrap around her. He clung to her with hand and stump, as though he might pull her close enough that he could climb inside her, bask in the warmth and love, and the goodness that was purely hers and so bright it was almost blinding. He tried to reach for it, but he thought it might burn him if he got too close, for it was a goodness he would never hope to achieve on his own. “And you?” He turned his face into her neck and inhaled the scent of her. Leather and soap, steel, and something flowery, something light that reminded him of the heather and wildflowers that grew on the cliffs near the Rock. “Do I have you?”

Her eyes closed at the rawness of his words. She wondered how long he had been sitting alone in the dark with only the wine as his company. Brienne turned her face into his hair and let her lips move against his ear. “An army of the dead could not drag me away, I do not think a few lies from your sister would do any better.” She felt him shudder again and thought it might be relief. If a few lies from his sister had done this to him, though a child was a little more grievous to lie about than the secret she was keeping, she could not imagine what his response might be when he finally learned of it. Her hands moved to his shoulders and her fingers curled into him. Brienne drew her bottom lip between her teeth before she pushed him away. Her eyes studied his face, the deep circles beneath his red-rimmed eyes and the way his mouth still turned down with sadness. “You may wish otherwise in moment.”

His eyes narrowed at the worry in her gaze. They dropped to the sight of her chewing at her lip, a nervous habit he knew. “What could you possibly say that you think would ever pull me from your side? I know all of your deeds and not even Duncan the Tall could match them for honor,” he drawled, though it was sarcasm rather than humor that filled his tone. He could not take another blow, not now, and certainly not from her. He had not prayed in some years, since he was a boy at least, but he asked the gods now not to take this from him, not to take her. He would not survive it.

“The Queen intends to name me as her heir, should another option not present itself beforehand.” She kept her gaze on his eyes as she revealed that which the Queen had given her leave to share, but she had thought it better contained. “She will put the matter before the Small Council after the Coronation.”

His arms dropped away from her as dread settled in his stomach like a heavy block of marble. “You did not tell me,” he said woodenly.
Her heart fluttered wildly. “The Coronation is weeks away. I was hoping the matter would resolve itself and a better choice would be found before then, that she would either be with child or that her mind would have settled on another. I knew you would worry and you need not if she changes her mind.”

Jaime’s eyes narrowed. He searched for the truth of it, and found his original assessment to hold fast. She could not lie. Her guileless eyes were too wide and filled with concern, for him if not herself. He barked a short, mirthless laugh. “Even when you conceal the truth, you cannot do it selfishly.” He reached up to rub at his aching head. “Try to make a few mistakes, Brienne, so the rest of us do not look like such poor wretches.”

She snorted at him. “I have made mistakes a plenty, I assure you.”

“Oh really?” His hand dropped away and he glowered at her. “How many boys have you pushed from windows, wench?”

“I almost lost Sansa to chase Stannis down in the woods outside Winterfell. She might have died fleeing from Ramsay Bolton, and I would have been to blame.” Her brows lifted and her head tilted. “You are not the only one who is fallible, though you are often the more foolish of us.”

“I will grant you that one,” he pointed out, “but you did save her in the end, and I dare to say that had you not already been in the woods when she escaped, you might not have done the deed.”

Brienne huffed a sigh at him. “Are we to argue now over whose deeds are worse?”

He almost smiled at his ability to annoy her. He might have, had he any mirth left in him. “No,” he told her. “I do not want to argue with you. I’m too tired to argue.” His eyes closed and he exhaled a long, shuddering sigh. “I am too tired for anything, I think.”

Her fingers combed over his hair. He mourned the loss of a dream that had not even existed and she ached for him. How much more could his sister take from him before there would be nothing of him left? She was locked away now, though, and Brienne sent up a silent vow to do better at keeping his heart shielded from her darkness. “You should rest,” she said quietly, “and have a bath.” Her nose wrinkled. “You reek of a wine barrel.”

Jaime folded his arms around her again and nestled close. He laid his head against her strong shoulder with a sigh. “With good reason. I think I drank a wine barrel. It wasn’t very good, either. I think Tyrion is hoarding all the good wine near his own rooms. When I am sure that I am dying on the morrow, all from having partaken of terrible wine, will you go and avenge me?”

“Absolutely not.” She laid an arm across his shoulders and let her hand rub his back. The other she slipped into his hair, which had grown longer than she had seen it since their time in the Riverlands. She stroked her fingers against his scalp and thought perhaps she heard him purr. “You’re not angry?”

“At you?” He sighed. “I have loved you since probably that godforsaken bear, though it took too long to realize it. What could you do to turn me away when I would not even leave my mad, lying, murdering, cunt of a sister whom I only thought I loved. When I did finally leave her, I left her for you. I wasn’t going to let you die alone in that frozen waste pit.”

“And yet, you could not simply tell me that?” She rolled her eyes toward the heavens. “Instead I got it’s bloody hot in here.”

Jaime lifted his head and glowered at her. “You are never going to let that go, are you?”
“I will tell our grandchildren on my deathbed if I must,” she shot back.

He grinned goofily at her before leaning forward and capturing her mouth with his. Grandchildren. Theirs. Hers and his. However they might come about. Even if they did not have a child of their own, perhaps Podrick would have a brood of ten or twelve so that half of them might foster at the Rock to be spoiled rotten. They would teach them swordplay, and better footwork than their father’s, and of course how to make a mockery of the North… when Brienne wasn’t looking, of course. And all of them would mock him for his lousy seduction skills and think their grandmother was a saint for having put up with him for so very long. It was a dream he had not thought to let himself have, a dream he thought he could almost grasp. It warmed him through and left him wanting more.

She wrapped her arms around him and held him when he burrowed close again. When he released her mouth her buried his face in her neck, and though the whiskers tickled her skin, she sighed at the way he clung to her. Brienne turned her face into his shoulder and held him just as closely. It was all that she could do, all that she could give him in the shadow of his pain. His sister had flayed him open and laid him bare. She would pull the pieces back together and hold him for as long as the gods allowed.

It did not go unnoticed by her that she held him now, in that room, as she had wanted to then. He was sending her away and she had wanted to cling to him, but could not allow herself to give in to her own foolish desires. At the time she thought she would take them to her grave, fully unrequited. How could he love her? His heart was filled with another, and she had the whisperings of her horrible old septa in her head, to remind her when she pined for him that there was naught she had that any man would ever want. Brienne knew better than that now.

What was beauty but a shield to hide the darkest and ugliest soul behind? When they first met she thought him beautiful, and golden, and terrible. The world knew his deeds, though the worst of them were whispered in confession to Lady Catelyn. She could not see the scars, the battered, damaged parts of him that were hidden behind his beauty and his sharp tongue. She did not see it until she truly looked. It was said, once, that his sister was the most beautiful woman in the realm, and yet hers was the ugliest soul that Brienne had ever encountered. Her lady had the appearance of a beautiful, sweet girl, but it hid the wounds that had been inflicted upon her, and the strength that helped her survive. No one would know, to look at Lady Sansa, that hers was a soul of steel, one of honor and kindness. She would bend, but she would not break. The Queen, too, was a beautiful woman, but there was darkness in her. Wounds they could not see. Her beauty hid a fiery temper that she fought to control.

Brienne had none of that. She had no beauty or grace to hide behind. She was only herself, as she had always been. She did what she must, as her conscience dictated, as honor demanded. She was not without flaws, nor her own wounds and scars, and darkness. Despite all of that, all that she knew, and had done, and had seen, she had not dared to dream. She had not dared to want for herself. There was only her honor, her oaths, and her duty.

Her hands fisted in his tunic and a shudder ran down her spine. His arms tightened around her in response and she sighed.

“I loved you then,” she whispered.

“I know.” His lips curved into a smile against the soft skin of her neck. “Your eyes cannot lie.” He pulled her impossibly closer and let his eyes close. If he ever let her go he would be lost. His heart twisted painfully. Best to not even think of it.
Poor Jaime, that lovable fool. The beauty of a good redemption arc, when it is not destroyed at the last minute (yeah, I'm still a little bit not over it) is that I do not condone or forget his mistakes, but Brienne helped us see beyond that, and that poor lion needs a hug. Not to say he doesn't need to be smacked upside the head from time to time, but... a hug, good thing he's got a strong lady knight to do that for him. :)

I am a fool.

The thought ran through Jaime’s mind in the moment before he walked through the door to his aunt’s chambers. He had taken that moment to glance back at Brienne and she mustn’t have expected him to, because the facade she had been wearing had slipped, just for a moment, just long enough for him to see the anxiety she managed to hide from him.

Of course she was worried. Why had that not occurred to him? Probably because she was so stubbornly, stupidly brave so much of the time. When he awoke that morning, closer to noon truthfully, his head pounding from the wine he overindulged in the previous night, he found a hot bath, a light breakfast, and his wench waiting for him. She should have been training with her squire, or seeing to Lady Sansa, doing something other than reading through the correspondence she usually saved for the evening hours. Instead she sat, quietly, while he took his time getting ready for his day. That probably should have been his first clue that something was wrong, but he had stupidly thought all of that was because of his mood the night before. Because she cared.

Well, of course she cared, but Brienne wasn’t exactly the soft and pampering type. Come to think of it, he couldn’t actually name one time in all the years he had known her when she had ever done anything even remotely soft, or pampering. Not even when he’d lost his hand.

In all fairness she had taken care of him then. She had fed him, kept him alive, washed his body when he was too weak to care that he was covered in filth and his own sickness. The point was, she wasn’t exactly tender about it. Although he knew that was just her way of trying to rile him enough to want to fight, to want to live. She hadn’t done it out of the tenderness of her heart. She did it because it was the right thing to do, because he had saved her, and because she needed him alive to trade for the Stark girls.

That was then. Things had changed since then, quite a lot actually. But one very important thing had remained the same.

He was still the stupidest Lannister.

Or perhaps he was just the most self-obsessed Lannister. It didn’t really matter. What did matter was that in the space of a heartbeat and half of another he saw anxiety in her gaze. It was gone the moment she realized he was looking at her, hidden behind her usual stoic expression. It was too late to do anything about it, though. They had already been announced and the household guard was holding the door for them. It was the first time in all the many long weeks, months now, since that first night in Winterfell when he followed her to her rooms that Jaime stopped to wonder what it was, exactly, that he had asked of her that night.

She had given herself to him, body and soul, and heart, and perhaps he had become too content with the idea that she had chosen him to really think beyond what it was that he had gained. She had made this choice. Brienne was very clear on that. He could not have maneuvered her toward it, of that Jaime was certain. She was not a woman to be maneuvered or cornered, or even manipulated. She had suffered too much for that, had dealt too often with being the brunt of others’ jokes, of being the disappointment of men too shallow to really see her.
He spent the previous night wallowing in his own grief and self-loathing and she had come to him. Of course she had. Jaime wondered if some small part of her expected him to. She saved him, over and over again, even from himself, and now he was left to consider if perhaps he just expected that to always be the way between them.

No.

Of course not.

They were more than that. He thought of leaving her behind, giving her back her life, sending her back to Winterfell with her Lady and his breath was almost stolen from his chest. He could not be without her. If by his side was where she chose to be, who was he to take that from her?

Jaime reached for her hand, almost without thinking, and let his fingers tangle with hers. He turned his body toward her, for just a moment, and let his lips brush the curve of her jaw as he spoke, voice far too low for anyone but her to hear. “She will love you, and if she does not, I will send her to the Riverlands to her Frey husband and she will not bother you again.”

Her eyes widened, just a fraction, before she hissed back. “She is your aunt.” The matriarch of his family, and Brienne wondered if this tightness in her chest was how he had felt upon meeting her father. He had done that alone, though, and she felt badly for that now. At least she had him at her side for this, but the two situations were not so dissimilar. Even as beautiful as he was to look upon he was not without his flaws. His reputation was not entirely exaggerated, for all that she knew he was better than his deeds. Here she was, her own deeds far more noble and honorable, but she was aware of her own failings, and not only those of her physical presence.

“Yes.” Jaime smirked at her. “I don’t care. I’m yours.” He gave her hand a squeeze and when she rolled her eyes at him, because he was being a bit melodramatic, he felt a little better. He saw her shoulders straighten and determination replace whatever worry had lingered in her gaze.

He made it all sound so simple. She wanted to throttle him for that. It was anything but simple. Or was it? It had always been that way between them, simple and complicated, easy and hard. Her on one side and him on the other. Stark against Lannister. Two warriors. Two knights. Man and woman. They had been bound by their oaths, by the secrets he laid at her feet, by the lie he told to save her, by so much and so little all at once. Now it was her heart that bound her to him and she could not walk away.

Not again. Not this time.

They had both chosen others before. They had chosen sides and duties, and oaths. Fate had finally given them this, brought them together in a time and place when they could choose each other, when it was safe, at last, to indulge their own wants. She would be a fool to turn from that.

Before either of them could dwell on it further, they stepped into the sitting room of the chambers his aunt had been granted for the duration of her stay in King’s Landing. Lady Genna Lannister was seated in an ornate high-backed chair in the center of the room. It might have been a throne, for all that she had positioned it as such. The buxom woman, whose hair was more silver than golden now, but still braided and coiled in an intricate design, looked down her nose at the pair of them when they finally appeared before her. Her gown was deep crimson, with gold threaded filigree embroidered at the hems of the bodice, sleeves, and skirt. She sat before them, as regal as any queen, and it was not hard to see where Cersei had inherited her bearing.

“Well,” Genna’s lips pursed unhappily at her nephew. “I see that you have not gone and gotten lost in the single day since I last put eyes upon you, though apparently you have forgotten the common
courtesy of explaining your absences when they happen. You were expected for dinner, Jaime.”

He sighed quietly. His shoulders slumped beneath the weight of her displeasure. Jaime looked at her through his lashes, head bowed slightly, just as he had done when he was a boy and faced with her chastisement. “I know. I am sorry. I had intended to join you. I can only beg your forgiveness,” he said sincerely, “it was… sadly unavoidable.” He didn’t know how much of his relationship with Cersei that his aunt was aware of, how much she ignored or chose to deny. It was easier to not speak of it in certainties, at least beyond the hold that they all knew his twin had always had on him.

“Yes.” Genna tilted her head at him. “It is not my forgiveness you should be begging. You sent your little brother to me in your stead, after what he did, and instead of groveling my pardon for having murdered his father, my brother, your brother spent the evening making your excuses.” A single, well sculpted brow arched. “Just as he has done since he was old enough to do so.” Genna pointed a finger at him. “You will be apologizing to your brother, Jaime Lannister, and whatever amends he asks of you will be his. I will hear no objections, and I’d best not hear you’ve dodged that responsibility.”

He might have been a boy again, with how she made him feel that he was no taller than Tyrion. Jaime’s shoulders slumped further. “Yes, Aunt Genna.” It was all that he said, all that he could say, considering how rude it was of him to abandon Tyrion to her mercies and not even send his excuses before closing himself away and drinking his way through the better part of a cask of wine. “He survived the night then?”

Genna rolled her eyes at him. She had seen that look before, the hopeful rise of his brows, the slight tilt of his chin. He had been using it on anyone who thought to be cross with him since he was a babe. “You may think that you are too loveable and handsome to draw my ire, my boy, but you are not.” She exhaled a slow sigh. “Your brother will have to earn my trust again, but sadly I do understand his motives. That does not change what he did, but he is a lion. We fight with teeth and claws when we needs must, even against each other.” She looked beyond him then and lifted her chin. “Well, are you going to introduce me or do you expect the girl to stand there all day waiting?” She waved her hand at them, beckoning them closer. “Come on then, who is it that you’ve brought me?”

Genna knew very well and could see with her own eyes that the tales she had heard were not exaggerations or lies. The woman was a bloody giantess and not at all much to look upon, but she stood proudly just behind Jaime’s right shoulder and when Genna finally let her gaze wonder over the woman, she raised her chin and stared back, strong and unwavering. She felt the corner of her mouth twitch but suppressed the urge to smile. Oh, Tywin would have liked this one, she thought, strong of body and of will. This was no meek little kitten to cower among their pride. Genna watched her nephew turn to the woman, witnessed the softening of his gaze and held back a sigh. So that was true as well, he had left his sister and ridden north, not for a promise or a death wish, he’d done it for a woman, or perhaps for all three. Genna didn’t especially care about the reasons; it was the result that interested her.

“Aunt Genna,” his tone had softened as well, even as he reached out and laid his golden hand against his Lady Knight’s elbow to bring her forward beside him. “This Lady Brienne of Tarth, heir of Evenfall, daughter of Lord Selwyn of Tarth, who is the Lord Paramount of the Stormlands. She is a hero of Winterfell, Knight of the Seven Kingdoms, and the future Lady of Casterly Rock and Commander of the Westerlands forces.” He looked at his aunt when he’d finished naming all of his Lady’s many, and earned, titles and smiled crookedly. “Assuming of course that I do manage to get her in front of the Septon before she comes to her senses.”

Brienne cast a sideways glance at him, her look intending to convey that it could happen sooner
rather than later, but for his Aunt she bowed her head respectfully. “Lady Genna, it is a privilege to make your acquaintance.” She felt the older woman’s scrutiny clear to her bones but she would not allow herself to be cowed, however much her stomach might be churning while they waited for her judgment. She had fought the Hound in single combat and won, she had rescued Lady Sansa Stark from her Bolton captors, and survived the Long Night, when so many others had fallen. She had fought the dead, in the face of one old woman, Brienne simply tilted her chin and folded her hands in front of her.

Genna felt the corners of her mouth twitch again as amusement filled her breast. Her gaze flitted back to her nephew and she shook her head. He looked upon the woman with adoration. It was completely unbidden and she wasn’t at all certain that he could have concealed it had he thought to try. He did not, that much was obvious to all of them. Genna gripped the arms of her chair and rose, not as easily as she might have in her youth, but still with a great deal of grace. She strode the few steps that separated them and stopped in front of the woman who had so captured her nephew’s entire being. Up close her features were even more severe. She could see the faint scars battle had wrought in the scar above the woman’s lip and the way her nose curved from having been broken too many times. She was broad and tall, but her eyes, they were quite startling.

From the corner of her eye she saw Jaime grow rigid. His eyes narrowed, his hand clenched. He would fight even her, Genna thought, if she thought to insult this creature. She would not. The thought had not even occurred to her. A weak wife would never have suited him. He was his father in that way. Joanna might have been lost to them in the childbed, but she had never been a weak woman. “Lady Brienne.” Her lips pursed. “Ser Brienne, I think, is more appropriate.” She held out a hand and for a moment Genna thought the other woman might hesitate, but she did not. The palm that was placed against hers was wide, strong, and calloused, but her fingers were long and thin, warm and gentle. It was larger than hers, surely, but not the hand of a man, for Genna had experienced enough of those to know the difference. “My brother Tywin was once the most powerful man in all of Westeros,” she began, and ignored Jaime when she heard him hiss. “He was Hand to three kings in his time and once commanded the greatest army this land had ever seen. Do you know what they said of him? Those who actually knew him?”

“I do not, my Lady.” In truth, Brienne was puzzled at this line of conversation. Lady Genna held her hand between her two palms, her grasp cool but unthreatening. She was tempted to glance beside her, to seek Jaime’s gaze, but did not. Instead she returned the woman’s long, calculating green gaze. “I did not know the man. The last time I was in King’s Landing, during his life, our paths barely crossed.” Jaime had seen to that. He had worried at what his family might make of her. He had shielded her from them.

“That is a pity.” Genna turned her gaze on her nephew then. “I think he would have quite approved of you.” She felt a good deal of pleasure at the surprise that was writ across his face. “When my brother’s wife was still alive, it was known that Tywin ruled the Seven Kingdoms, but Joanna ruled Tywin.” She turned her gaze back to her future good-niece and smiled. “My brother tried for years to arrange a marriage for his eldest son, to no avail and a good deal of despair. It comes as no surprise to me that it would take a woman capable of wielding a sword and commanding whole armies to capture the boy’s attention. He will rule the west, and you shall rule him, as it should be,” she added with a nod.

Brienne’s brows drew together. “I do not seek to rule Jaime…”

“You do not seek to rule anyone,” Genna guessed with a nod. “That is what stands you apart, and if I know my sweet nephew, it is what has drawn his attentions.” She gave the top of the woman’s hand a pat before she drew away from her. “Do not mistake me, Ser, it will do him well to be bound to someone with stronger wills than his, someone who would not use that against him. I think you
know my meaning well enough that we need not speak of such things openly.”

Cersei. Of course. Brienne glanced at Jaime when his aunt turned away from them. She arched a brow at him. To think, it had once been the most closely guarded secret in all the kingdoms, and yet his family had seemed to know it well enough, they had just not spoken of it. “Everyone has chosen to have their own opinions of why we will be wed. It is politically advantageous, the alliances created will strengthen my cousin’s rule and bring peace to the land.” Brienne rolled her eyes at that, she could not help but do so. She was so very tired of hearing all those things. “The choice was ours to make and we have done so.”

“Believe me, I know that well. My nephew has never appreciated being maneuvered, however much he allowed himself to be over the years.” She returned to her chair and smiled at the girl who had, until that moment, remained silent near the edge of the room. “You will meet many of this family in the days and months to come. The cousins are numerous, far more than Cersei would have allowed the world to remember. Joy is my brother Gerion’s natural daughter, and dear to us all.” She turned her eyes on her niece. “Pour the wine, will you sweetling, we could all use it I think.”

The girl, whose long golden hair has been left to flow in loose ringlets down her back, moved to the table to tip the flagon toward three goblets. She poured with practiced ease, though she kept glancing at her cousin and his betrothed. She was brimming with questions and the want to ask them, but she folded her lips together and concentrated on not spilling the wine as she passed the goblets to those waiting. “Lady Brienne.” She smiled sweetly, and recalled her cousin’s words the previous day. She was truly lovely, the girl thought. When her eyes met Jaime’s she all but bounced in front of him, hands clasped tightly as she waited while he and his lady took their seats. Only then did she pour wine for herself and claim a chair on the edge of the group. Joy was used to being on the outside looking in. For all that she knew her family loved her, it was the life of a bastard, even one that was cared for so well.

“Joy,” Jaime told Brienne, though she knew much of this already, “was raised at Casterly Rock, she has lived between Aunt Genna’s household and my Uncle Kevan’s for much of her life.” She had been born in Lannisport, and Tywin, unwilling to abide his lost brother’s child being raised as anything but a Lannister had given her mother work at the Rock, though he had never had her legitimized. Joy’s mother had died when she was still little more than a babe, but the family had cared for her anyway. His father had thought his Uncle Gerion a fool to go off as he had, and Jaime had often wondered which his father resented more… that his uncle was lost, or that he had left behind only a bastard born daughter to carry on his legacy.

“You would not take me on your adventures, Cousin,” Joy teased gently, “where else was I to reside?”

“There were not many adventures to be had in King Robert’s court,” Genna snorted, “unless you count how often the King stumbled from his throne in search of more wine an adventure. The most adventurous thing this one did was brawl in the street like a common grub and then get himself taken captive by a green, northern boy.”

“I don’t know,” Jaime smirked at them; he tossed a smug look at his Lady Knight. “The latter ended up serving me well. I recall one of my gaolers being quite a bit fairer than the rest.”

“Then you remember it differently than I,” Brienne said, and not without a little fondness, despite the huff of her sigh.

Joy bit her bottom lip and sat straight in her seat. She leaned toward them, eyes brimming with excitement. She opened her mouth to speak, but quickly stopped herself. When her eyes flitted to her Aunt her lips turned down in a slight pout.
Genna rolled her eyes at them. “Oh go ahead,” she waved a hand at the girl. She was too much her father’s daughter, too much like her cousins, full of dreams and questions, and curiosities about the world. Genna could not help be fond of the child, and perhaps they had all over indulged her throughout the years, but she was a dear girl, and there was so very little about their family that was truly dear.

The girl’s entire face lit. She turned her body toward them, only half perched upon her chair. Her entire attention was focused on the tall lady warrior that had managed to capture her cousin’s heart. “Is it really true you were his captor? Did you really have to fight a dozen savage northmen to try and save him, and the bear!” Her green eyes, a shade lighter than Jaime or Cersei’s, or most of her cousins’, were bright pools of shining jade. “I heard they made you fight a bear, and he saved you, he should have left you but he saved you. Is it really true? And then he gave you his own sword and sent you to find cousin Tyrion’s young bride, and it’s really a pity she had to flee, I heard she was very beautiful and very sweet. Cousin Tyrion deserved someone sweet and beautiful to love him, and oh! But you did save her, didn’t you? I heard you even fought that horrid beast, The Hound, I saw him fight at a tourney once. He was terrible good, so you must be very strong, and very brave to —”

She had hardly even taken a breath. Brienne’s eyes were wide and she looked as though she might be willing to bolt from the room at any moment, if the blush beginning to coat her cheeks was any indication. Jaime laughed. His young cousin had always loved hearing their stories, but these were not things he had ever spoken openly about. Jaime shook his head. “Joy, where did you hear all of this?”

“Tyrion told me some of it last night, after Aunt Genna retired for the evening,” she admitted, looking shy for a moment. “The rest was in letters Tommen sent me, we used to write often, he and Cella and I… before…” She looked away, sadness filled her gaze, “Before he was king and no longer allowed such childish pursuits. Cella said she was going to order him to keep writing to us, just because he was king did not mean he was no longer her baby brother, or my baby cousin, but then… many things happened,” she finished quietly.

Jaime turned his surprised eyes on his aunt. He had not thought that there would be any kind of correspondence between Myrcella, Tommen and Joy. They were of an age, yes, but he could not conceive of a world where Cersei would have allowed her precious cubs to have anything to do with the family’s shameful bastard. “I did not know that you were close to your cousins,” he managed to say finally.

“Why not?” Genna shook her head at him. She smiled, though not unkindly. “You had Daven and Addam. Tyrion had Cleos and Lyonel. Kevan sent Lancel, Martyn and Willem to court when they were much too young.” Her lips twisted in displeasure at the memory. “He should have waited a few years, but he would not listen to reason. It would have been better had he sent them to foster and squire in the Westerlands, rather than to this viper’s nest. Joffrey was a pitiful, cruel child,” she explained with a shrug. “It was clear to me that the other two were lonely, and once Myrcella was sent to Dorne, what was there for her of family but a few letters? Her mother would not know if a few of them were from a lonely cousin, left at the Rock, with no one of an age to keep her company but a few poor Frey cousins.”

His aunt had fostered a closeness between the children that the adults who should have done ignored. Jaime shook his head, suddenly shamed at that fact. It was something he should have thought of, but how would he? He wasn’t allowed to be more to them than an uncle and a glorified bodyguard. “I am sure that Myrcella and Tommen appreciated that.” He smiled at Joy. “It must have been terribly lonely without their letters, I am sorry Cousin.”
“So am I.” She gazed back at him, for a moment seeming much older than her seventeen years. “I brought a few of them with me that I thought you might like to read.”

Jaime nodded, even as he struggled to swallow past a suddenly tight throat. He glanced at Brienne with a sigh. “Truly the poorest kept secret in all of Westeros, after Stannis spread it about.”

Her heart ached for him. She knew how much the loss of his children had pained him, how much he regretted not taking a more active role when he should have. “Lucky it is then,” she told him plainly, “that I dealt with Stannis.” She waited until the shadows left his eyes and he managed a small smile and a nod before she turned back to his cousin. “Yes,” she told the girl, “I was his captor, for a time. It is only by the luck of the gods he lived long enough for us both to be taken captive by the Bloody Mummers. The man did not shut up for even a moment across the whole of the Riverlands.”

Jaime scoffed at her. “How was I supposed to know the wench did not appreciate the same courtship activities of every other woman in the kingdoms? How else is a man to get to know his future bride if he does not speak to her.”

“Insult her,” Brienne shot back.

“Attempts to tease a smile from her dour lips,” he said in response.

“In truth,” she sighed, “I had begun to wonder if my oath to Lady Catelyn was worth the aggravation of delivering him alive. Surely if anyone was to understand my frustration it would be his own family.”

“She contemplated running away with me,” Jaime drawled, “we could have been very happy living as a pair of sell swords, traveling the wooded lands of Westeros,” he gazed wistfully at his love, eyes sparkling happily, even when she scowled at him.

“I had thought to gag him,” she said drily, “but giving him any response at all made it that much worse.” Were it not for the musical, joyful sound of the girl’s laughter, she might have found a reason to cut this visit short, or at least find something else to talk about, but even Jaime was smiling again, and so she suppressed her own discomfort.

“Then one day she finally agreed to spar with me,” he said.

“He stole my spare sword and attempted to kill me,” Brienne corrected. “Though it was a poor attempt at best.”

“Even chained for a year, and as weak as I was on the bridge, I was besting her before we were interrupted.” He flashed a wide, arrogant smile at her.

“You were face down in the dirt,” Brienne reminded him, “that is no winning strategy that I have ever heard of before.”

“You had never fought anyone like me before,” he told her. “What did you expect?”

Her brow arched. Brienne tilted her chin at him. “An actual fight?”

Gods save them both but he loved her. Jaime’s lips twisted toward a smile, but arrogance practically leaked from his every cell. “You’ll have a fight, Ser, in but a few days hence, make no mistake about that.”

“Yes.” Her blue eyes, though they sparkled with joy and fondness for him, were the color of the sky
at dusk. The deepest indigo he had ever seen, and it never failed to take his breath away, even when
she added a low, drawling, “I believe Ser Lyle has promised to fight in the melee…”

“Fortunate indeed that my new wife will have someone upon whom to place her bets,” He fired
back. Theirs was the first bout, of course, and their vows would already be spoken well before the
melee began.

“Why think you that your wife will not be taking part?” Her brows rose while her chin lifted in
defiance. “It would hardly be honorable to place bets when I will be fighting among them myself.”

It was genuine surprise that filled Jaime’s expression at her statement. “You’re going to join the
melee?” He leaned toward her. “I did not think we were expected to participate beyond the start.”

“It is not expected,” her lip curled, “but I intend to, yes. I see no reason why not. I am a knight, am I
not?” Their marriage would not change that fact, or was he already forgetting that, despite their many
agreements to the contrary?

“You are.” He grinned. “I seem to recall having a rather front row seat to that particular event. I just
didn’t realize you truly meant to enter the tourney. Is Lady Sansa aware?”

Brienne blinked at him. He looked genuinely curious, and so utterly befuddled by the idea. She
almost laughed but managed only to roll her eyes at him. “Jaime,” a small affectionate smile turned
her lips upward. “It is not the Stark banner that I will be competing under.”

His eyes widened. He heard his aunt hoot with laughter and knew it was quite directed at him. The
reality of it had not truly occurred to him until that moment. It was all a rather abstract thought, this
marriage that was on the horizon for them. The idea that she would be his, truly and irrevocably was
just there, waiting, hovering right out of reach. Now he realized just how close and real it was. She
would fight in the melee, in full armor once their vows were done, and she would do so beneath a
Lannister banner. Beneath his banner. He could not help it. Jaime’s smile was bright and nearly
blinding.

“The Westerlands will be proud to cheer for their Lady,” he told her, “and I look forward to
watching any who stand against you fall.”

Her head bowed, even as a blush began to rise up her neck to fill her cheeks with color. Brienne
pressed her lips together to stop the smile that threatened to blossom, but could do nothing for the
sheen of emotion in her eyes when she looked up at him through her pale lashes. Her concern had
been for naught. He would never cow or hobble her. She would be as free to be herself as she had
always been, perhaps more so. I am yours, he had told her, but in truth, she was already his. Lady
Genna’s laughter drew her attention and Brienne’s blush only darkened when the woman lifted her
goblet in salute. “I never knew the Westerlands to be quite so accepting of such oddities,” she said.

“Oh my dear,” Genna shook her head, “in the West we know that beauty is as wild as the mountains
and the sea. We value strength and character above all. We are not as suspicious as the North, nor as
complacent as the Riverlands. We have none of the reclusive paranoia of the Vale, nor the snobbery
of the Reach. I think a girl from the Stormlands would quite fit with us, for its storms are as untamed
as our mountains.” She smirked. “If you do not believe that, then you can at least believe that I
would not stop this fool from wedding a woman willing to have him whilst he is still young enough
to know what to do with a bride.”

“Aunt Genna!” Joy looked thoroughly scandalized. “She will think we do not like her!”
“We are Lannisters,” Genna reminded her, “we do not like anyone, we simply tolerate whom we must.”

Joy rolled her eyes at her aunt and turned back to Brienne. She leaned across the wide space between their chairs and took her hand. “We will be glad to welcome you into the family. I know my cousin has chosen well. I have never seen him so happy, or happy at all, really.”

“Worry not, Joy,” Jaime sighed, though he placed his chin in his hand and smiled at the two of them, “If anyone knows that I am an idiot, it is Brienne.” But he was, and would ever be, her idiot.

She smiled gently at him. “Well,” Brienne huffed a sigh before she turned her attention back to Joy. The girl was sweet, much too kind for this family, she thought, or perhaps her perceptions of the Lannisters had been colored by Tywin and Cersei, for even Tyrion was nothing like the rest of them. Jaime had been an unbearable ass when she first met him, but he had changed, or perhaps it was just that he was more himself. He seemed to not be so unrecognizable to his old friends or even the family that had now joined him in the capital. She shook her head and pushed the thoughts aside. She would have time enough to get to know the rest of them without the shadows of Tywin or Cersei hanging over their heads. “Only an idiot would jump into a bear pit without a weapon, injured and weak and missing his hand.”

Jaime straightened in his chair. “I had to save my wench! They would not have let the bear harm me. They weren’t going to risk my father’s wrath. It was the only way. You were already hurt!” His glance moved to her neck, covered though it was by her tunic, he knew exactly where the scars were, had mapped them well enough with lips, and tongue, and teeth.

“So it is true.” Joy sighed, before they could begin arguing the fact. “I had wondered. Tommen liked his stories, especially the ones about brave knights. I thought he made some of that up, he always wanted to be just like his Ser Uncle.” She smiled kindly at Jaime. “It would not have been a stretch for him to imagine you fighting a bear, even without your hand. That was very romantic of you, cousin.”

“It was.” Jaime lifted his chin and smiled proudly, even when Brienne scoffed at him. “You should see the sword I gave her. Every lady should get jewels as tokens.” The rubies in the hilt were jewels enough for one such as her, though he would have given her any she asked for, if it were jewels she wanted.

“Do not encourage him,” Brienne warned, “he will spend the rest of the day boasting about his deeds and many of them would be exaggerations. You may see the sword later, if you like.” She was not wearing it for this meeting, and felt its absence at her side, as she always did when Oathkeeper was not readily at hand.

“I would like that.” Joy sat back in her chair. “Has he told you of the time he jumped off the cliffs at Casterly Rock?” She cast a sly look at her cousin and when he sighed, her lips twisted into a smirk. She wondered how many stories she could tell before he sought his escape from them. Joy shared a look with her Aunt. Lady Genna nodded and she sat gleefully, prepared to spend the afternoon seeing if the golden lion could turn into a blushing lion, and thrilled entirely to have her cousin back.

-TBC-
I can only thank you for your patience. RL is such an inconvenient intruder.

To all who have commented, left kudos, and continued to read -- you're all rockstars!

Notes on this chapter: Ned Stark knew that the wolf was only as strong as his pack, but that seems to be a fact that escaped Tywin and Cersei. Tyrion, as clever as he is, has been a lone lion too long to really think in terms of how his family might benefit him, and not by his own fault. He really only ever had Jaime, and Jaime... well, we all know where his head has been. Genna, however, even as I read her parts in the books I thought she might have been far more clever than Tywin. So I think she would have, in some small ways, done what she could to strengthen the base of the pride... especially when they started dying off.

I will leave you with this thought, because it took me down a rabbit hole a couple of weeks ago, and boy was it a fun place: Genna and Olenna, teaming up to take over everything.

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